

RUN WILD WITH ME

SANDRA CHASTAIN

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Sandra Chastain



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Prologue

A fine spring rain began to fall somewhere outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Sam had been lucky to hitch a ride as far as he had. Now he was walking down a country road in the fading light of a late May afternoon.

His worn Stetson channeled rainwater down his collar, and the pack on his back, already sodden from the heavy drizzle, dug uncomfortably into his shoulders. Soon he'd be forced to find some kind of shelter for the night. It wouldn't be the first time he'd slept in a barn or under a tree.

For more than ten years Sam had been on the road, pausing a month here, two months there, depending on the job. There had been times when he'd thought about settling down, times that had come more and more often as the years passed. The problem was that he didn't belong anywhere. He wasn't sure that he ever had. And he had no idea what he'd hoped to accomplish by coming to the small Georgia town.

Meredith County, the road sign said, Arcadia—ten miles. Arcadia. The name jolted his mind, reached out and caused an ache inside him. It wasn't for himself that he'd come—he'd come for her.

Sam had never been to Arcadia. He hadn't been sure it was real. Now he admitted to an unexpected longing to see it for himself.

The sound of a car engine behind him caught his attention, and he glanced around as a battered pickup truck slowed down.

"Where you headed, boy?" The grizzled old farmer leaned his head out the window, letting a stream of brown tobacco juice fly through the air.

"Arcadia," Sam answered. It had been a long time since anybody had called him boy. Not since he was a green recruit in training camp on Parris Island had he allowed anyone to use the term. Except for his mother. For her the word *boy* had always been preceded by "my darling" or "my precious" and followed more often than not with "I love you."

"Arcadia," the farmer said matter of factly. "So'm I. Climb in."

The ride was settled with no conversation, and the well-soaked traveler loosened his pack, dropped it into the back of the truck, and climbed in, folding his long legs into the space beneath the dash. "Thanks."

"Not a'tall. Got business in Arcadia, have you?"

"Maybe."

"Family there?"

"I don't think so. Not anymore."

"You talk kinda funny."

"So do you."

There was a long silence while the farmer pulled off the sweat-stained baseball cap he was wearing and scratched his head. "Don't say much, do you?"

"Nope." Sam wasn't trying to be mysterious. He found it hard to talk to the old man. Too many peculiar emotions were assaulting his senses. He'd never been to Arcadia. But there was a sense of expectation slowly curling over him, the same kind of feeling he got when he held a piece of fine new wood in his hand and visualized the finished product.

"Name's Otis, Otis Parker," the farmer went on. "Got a tractor broke down. Been over to Cottonboro for a part."

The wipers screeched across the windshield as the rain temporarily tapered off. In the distance house lights began to flick on, making bright smears in the darkness.

Otis pumped the brakes and let the truck roll to a stop. "Here's where I turn off, boy. Never did get your name, but if you're aiming to find one of them motel rooms, there ain't one in Arcadia, and the hotel ain't likely to take in anybody they don't know."

"Sam Farley, Mr. Parker, and thanks for the lift. Would you by any chance know where Mrs. Mamie Hines lives?"

The farmer spit out the window once more and turned to look at Sam with a puzzled expression on his face. "Mamie Hines's place? That where you're heading?"

"Something wrong with that?" Sam was beginning to shiver under the wet denim jacket he was wearing. Tired, and more than a little light-headed, he was ready to reach the end of his journey before the rain began in earnest.

"Well ..." The farmer hesitated. "No. Just go straight on into town. When you get to the inter-section, go to your right. Last house on the road, but it's boarded up tight as a tick now. It may be hard to find in the dark, but anyone you ask will be glad to help you out if you get lost."

"Then it's real," Sam half whispered under his breath. He'd carried the promise of that house around in his mind for most of his life. It had been his security blanket through some pretty bad times. He hadn't been really sure it existed. "And my ... Mrs. Hines?"

"Old Mamie's been dead and gone for more'n two years now, buried over in the Methodist cemetery. Who are you, Sam Farley?"

"Mamie Hines was my grandmother." Sam lifted his pack from the back of the truck and slid his arms wearily into the straps. He hadn't expected Mamie to be there. The tax notice said plainly that the house was being auctioned off. There was nothing he could do about that. Three years of back taxes, even for a house in the south end of nowhere, was more money than he had left. He didn't know why he'd come.

He'd just stay the night. At least the house would provide a roof over his head, and, technically, it was his, at least until the auction. Yeah, just once he'd sit on that front porch, even without the lemonade and cookies his mother had reminisced about. Then he'd be on the road again. The truth was, he didn't belong in Arcadia anymore than he belonged anywhere else.

Above him in the night sky a bird called mourn-fully, dipped silently through the darkness, and flew away into the distance.

Arcadia. What kind of name for a town was that anyway? he wondered as he walked

off.

Flashes of lightning turned the night sky lemon-yellow behind the lacy black branches of the crab-apple trees that lined the drive to the old farmhouse.

Andrea Fleming stood beside her police car in the dark, trying to ignore the steady trickle of water that rolled off her rain-slicker hood and down her nose. She didn't even have her flashlight with her. It was standing upright on the desk back at the station, along with the bullets she'd removed from her gun. Leaving the car lights on at the base of the hill wouldn't help her at the top, and she'd only run down the battery.

For a moment she considered and rejected the idea of going back into town and calling her father. Five years before, when she'd returned to Arcadia, she'd sworn that she'd take care of herself. So far she'd managed just fine. Besides, Buck was in no condition to get up that drive on crutches, and he'd be fool enough to try.

No, the Arcadia City Council thought their city clerk was competent to serve as chief of police while Buck was laid up with a broken leg, and she wasn't about to let them down. And the truth was she didn't know for certain that there was an intruder. If she happened to encounter one, he wouldn't know she didn't have any bullets.

A "wild-looking cowboy" was how Louise Roberts had described the man when she reported that an outsider had stopped at her house looking for the Hines place.

"Just come along about dark, soaked to the skin. Been walking awhile, from the look of him."

"Who is he, did he say?" Andrea had asked, trying to make her voice sound official.

"Nope. Craziest thing I ever heard. Said he'd come to sit on Mamie's porch and drink lemonade, for his mother. Called me darling, he did. Got a way of frowning when he talks, like he's trying to pretend he don't care what you think. But he does."

A knifing sheet of rain slapped Andrea across her face, reminding her that the stranger, whoever he was, was trespassing and it was her job to check him out—now. Gritting her teeth, Andrea swallowed hard and plunged uphill through the brush.

She'd wasted too much time already. She hadn't been able to get away from Louise Roberts. "Just a little something, for Buck," Louise had insisted at the last minute, pressing a plate of homemade cookies and a thermos of coffee into Andrea's hands.

Mamie's driveway was both a jungle and a quagmire. More than once Andrea slipped in the stream of water flooding the sloping road. A flailing tree limb snagged the drawstring on her yellow slicker, untying it and ripping the hood from her head with a jerk. By the time she reached the porch, her dark hair was soaked.

Andrea looked up warily. The shadow of the house loomed over her like the body of some big bird huddled beneath ruffled black wings. She shivered.

Assuring Buck that she could handle herself as his temporary replacement was one

thing, but being the police chief was a far cry from her job as city clerk, which involved collecting water bills and managing city business. The truth was, everybody had expected Andrea simply to be Buck's legs while he couldn't walk. Arcadia didn't have any crime, and they didn't have intruders either. At least they never had—up until now.

Andrea forced herself to climb the steps leading to the porch. Someone was definitely inside. Through a crack between the planks of plywood covering the parlor windows, she could see a faint glow, a candle perhaps. She lifted the heavy brass knocker in the center of the door and let it fall, lifted it, and dropped it once more.

“Hello in the house!”

The rain chattering on the tin roof of the porch closed out all sound like a muffling curtain. He wasn't going to come to the door. She wished she could leave him in there and come back tomorrow, but Louise lived alone in the next house down the road. She was a citizen who needed reassurance.

This man, whoever he was, was an outsider, and outsiders didn't march brazenly into Arcadia, Georgia, on foot. Outsiders could make a person hurt inside where nobody could see—she knew firsthand. Still, Buck would never turn away from doing his duty. Neither would she.

Andrea chewed uneasily on her lower lip. She retraced her steps in the darkness and worked her way around to the back of the house. She found the stranger's entry point. The boards covering the door had been ripped away, and the wire screen just above the handle was gaping open. Andrea nervously unfastened her holster and drew her gun. She knocked again. No answer.

“Is there somebody there?”

No answer.

As the only officer of the law in the city of Arcadia, she told herself sternly, it was her duty to investigate. Shoring up her courage, she pushed open the screen door to the porch. There was a loud creak as she stepped inside. Andrea froze, expecting to hear the footsteps of the man inside. All she heard was the pounding of her heart and the sharp patter of rain overhead.

Cautiously, Andrea slipped out of her rain slicker, let it drop to the floor, and considered her next move. She stuck the gun under her arm while she removed a blue cap from her back pocket and tucked her hair beneath it. There was no point in letting the intruder know he was dealing with a woman.

Repositioning her gun, Andrea opened the door to the kitchen and tiptoed inside. Drawn toward the faint flicker of light emanating from what she remembered to be Miss Mamie's parlor, she slipped through the kitchen into the wide hallway. Outside, the storm suddenly hushed. In the silence the water in her shoes made a slushing sound as she moved.

Andrea cleared her throat and lowered her voice. “Is anybody there? I have a gun,” she threatened, hoping that the intruder wasn't waiting in the darkness, more afraid that he was.

Still no answer. Holding the gun before her like a shield, she crept down the hall.

Everything happened at once. Just as she felt his presence behind her, he caught her

throat in an iron grip and twisted her arm painfully behind her back. The gun hit the floor with a crash and skittered into the shadows as her captor choked off the scream lodged in her throat.

“Don’t move!” he growled.

His order was almost funny, since he was holding her in a death grip.

“Let me go!” she croaked. “I’m a police officer.” But the air was being crushed out of her, and all that was distinguishable was a weak “go” and “police.”

“Oh no. I’m not about to let you go, buddy. I’ll call the police, as soon as I find out what you’re up to.”

The man holding her was tall, with arms made of pure steel. She couldn’t budge. Her throat was dry and tight from the pressure of his grip. He began to nudge her forward. What was he going to do? She lurched awkwardly in the darkness. Her foot caught something on the floor, and she lost her balance, stumbling just enough to slam her free elbow into the solid body behind her. Suddenly she was falling.

The man released her arm, bent over double, and staggered backward. His foot shot out from under him as he stepped on her gun, and he crashed against the corridor wall with such force that he was propelled forward again, landing directly on top of Andrea.

For a moment he didn’t move. She couldn’t. Perhaps he was dead, she thought.

“I told you not to move,” he growled in a low threatening voice.

“Fat chance,” she gasped.

His body covered hers like a solid wet rug. The air was slowly being pushed from her lungs. *I’m dying*, she thought, *dying in the line of duty, and I’ve never made an arrest.* Jabs of pain radiated from the side of her head where it had slammed against the floor. There was a hard knot between her breasts, protruding painfully into her chest wall. The man above her began a slow circular move, bringing him nose-to-nose with her.

Andrea could feel short puffs of warm air on her forehead as he breathed. She froze, willing herself not to groan from the weight pressing down on her. It wouldn’t do to let him know that she was a woman when she was at such a disadvantage. Her lower body was beginning to tingle as his weight cut off her circulation.

After what seemed like an eternity, the knot between her breasts began to stir. His hand had been caught between them when he fell. There was a sudden shocked stillness as his fingers splayed themselves against her body.

“Sawblades and sledgehammers! A woman!” The stranger jerked his hand away, doing a half-sit-up in an attempt to untangle himself from her. “What the hell are you doing sneaking around here in the dark? I could have killed you.”

“You very nearly did. Get off me, you big hulk, before you smother me.” Andrea shoved him away and slithered out from beneath him, holding her aching head with both hands.

“Consider it an even exchange. I may never do the Texas two-step again,” the intruder said as he unfolded himself and came to stand over her.

She refused to look at him. “Where is my cap, and what have you done with my gun?” Andrea demanded, then considered the absurdity of her request. She’d made a fool out of herself. First, the gun wasn’t loaded. Second, his resounding chortle of disbelief said

clearly what he thought of her demands.

“Gun?” He reached down and lifted her roughly to her feet, his fingers digging painfully into her upper arm. “Somebody let you have a gun? Get in here in the light, where I can get a good look at you.”

“Light?” She attempted to jerk herself away from his grip and winced as her head protested her sudden movement.

“Light, as in fire.” He shoved her before him into the parlor. “The fire I was building in the fireplace when you broke in.”

The fire sizzled as water dripped down the chimney. The flames died for a moment, then flared up brightly. Her intruder was a twentieth-century highwayman with a menacing frown and piercing black eyes. Andrea gasped. The sound she made as she replenished her lungs with air wasn’t from fear this time. It was from pure shock. And the resounding ringing in her ears wasn’t entirely from the bump on her head.

Louise Roberts had been right.

The man was “wild-looking.” His jet-black hair was too long, his brows and lashes too theatrical. The dark stubble of his beard gave him a dangerous look. Lean and powerful, he had the troubled look in his eyes of a man who had seen too much pain. He seemed to smolder with tightly leashed energy.

“What kind of town is this, where the women skulk around in the dark playing with guns?” He spoke softly this time, waiting a long time in between each word as if he weren’t quite sure what to make of her.

“I’m not playing,” Andrea answered, her voice sounding as though it were coming from far away as she tried to escape from the unrelenting force of his gaze and the pressure of his hand clasping her arm.

He towered over her, holding her firmly as he stared down at her. “Too bad. I’m very good at games. It was your turn to be ‘it.’ ”

“Stop talking like that,” she snapped. “I think you’d better know, cowboy, I’m the chief of police, and you’re under arrest.”

“Arrest?” He tilted his head and smiled, never loosening the grip he had on her arm. “Well now, darlin’, we seem to have something of a problem here. Who’s got who?”

“It’s *whom*, and don’t call me darling.”

“Fine. I’m an agreeable fellow. What shall I call you?”

“Chief Fleming will do. Now, take your hand off me. It’s you who has the explaining to do.” She crossed her arms defiantly across her chest and stretched herself to her full height. “You’re wrinkling my uniform.”

“Uniform?” His gaze left Andrea’s face and skeptically studied the blue oxford fabric bunched up between his fingers. He swung around, turning her toward the fire.

As soon as the light touched her face, Sam Farley knew he’d made a mistake. He’d crossed paths with the law often enough during his travels to have overcome any fear of an officer in blue. It was the woman who caught him by surprise.

Sam felt his mouth tighten. She was standing there, returning his stare with a cool challenge that intrigued him. She looked like a cat who’d dropped down from the top of a fence and bristled her hair in warning to an intruder in her territory. A drop of

rainwater rolled down her face and fell to her shirt. It spread in a dark circle just above her pocket, the pocket that covered her left breast.

He allowed his gaze to slide up her slim neck and strong chin, which she'd jugged forward in a dare. She was tall with a mass of dark hair tousled in wet wild curls across her shoulders and down her back. Her eyes were blue, a shimmering blue, the color of a Nevada sky in midsummer just before a storm.

"Stormy," he whispered under his breath. Whoever she was, she'd forever be Stormy in his mind. "Well, well." He managed to pull his mind back to her accusation. "So you are a cop. Sorry. I didn't feel a badge."

"That's about the only thing you didn't feel, cowboy." The words slipped out, bringing back the mental picture of the two of them lying tangled on the floor.

Andrea felt her face flush, and she chastised herself for losing control of the situation. Buck would never have allowed himself to rise to the bait this way, and neither should she. "Now that you know who I am," she said forcefully, pulling away from him, "I'd like to know why you broke into Miss Mamie's house?"

"Because," he said simply, as if the reason were obvious enough for a child to understand, "I didn't have a key."

He spoke so sincerely that Andrea believed him. "In a crazy kind of way, that answer makes perfectly good sense," she admitted. "Now, would you like to explain why?"

"No. I don't know whether I can," he said, turning his fierce attention to the fire. He frowned. "I'm not sure that I ought to have come here. I always thought that she'd exaggerated. But she may have been right after all."

The tension eased from his voice. He flexed his shoulders, and from her side view she watched a slow smile spread across his face, changing a worried expression of grim suspicion into one of devilish delight. With a haircut and a shave, he might be ... interesting, Andrea decided.

"Who?" Andrea asked. "You just said that *she* may have been right. Who may have been right? Mr.... for heaven's sake, cowboy, what is your name?"

"Sam."

"Just Sam?"

He turned back to face her. "Sammuel Granger Farley. Sammuel with two *m*'s. My mama meant to name me Farley Granger after some movie star she fell for when she was a kid. My mother was a hoot. She had a good imagination. The hospital record keeper who wrote it down didn't, and she couldn't spell either."

"Where're you from, Sam with two *m*'s?" He was looking at her, but she could tell that he wasn't seeing her. For a moment he seemed to have forgotten she was there. Andrea waited, watching him stare thoughtfully down at her. Outside the house the lightning flashed again.

"Everywhere and nowhere," he finally answered. "I guess you'd call me a vagabond."

Suddenly a clap of thunder racked the house like an explosion, rattling the walls and windows, and vibrating the floor.

A bolt of lightning sliced through the sky, curled into a ball of fire, and ran along the electric wire into the parlor, exploding into a swirl of orange flame that crackled and

died at their feet.

Andrea screamed. Somehow, Sam's arms were around her, and her arms were around him. The wind ripped one of the wooden planks from the window and flung it down the porch like a boomerang. Rain slammed furiously against the windows like the frantic beat of a hundred hearts.

"Wow, you sure do set off some spectacular fireworks, Chief Fleming," Sam said softly. "Much more acceptable than gunfire. I think I'm going to like being your prisoner." Sam lifted his hand to the back of her neck and held her motionless, sending her pulse racing faster than a wild animal being chased by one of Otis Parker's coon dogs.

Fireworks? Andrea heard his words in horror. Her nerve endings vibrated as she fought the current of exhilaration sweeping through her. She knew what a coon felt like when it was about to be treed.

"Let me go." When she pulled away from him, she felt as if she'd been singed. Who was this man? How had he managed to turn his arrest into some kind of intimate encounter?

"Please?" she whispered raggedly. "That's enough. I insist that you tell me what you want here—right now." Sam stared at her in astonishment, then shook his head in exaggerated nonchalance. "No, ma'am. I think not. That wouldn't be wise at all, Chief. But what I'd settle for *right now* is a phone."

"If you're planning to call for help, forget it. No phone here, Mr. Farley. No taxi, and you already have the police."

"Call for help? Me? No way. I learned to take care of myself a long time ago. But I might be tempted to ask if you're the law in this place."

"Tonight I am. If you need to use a phone, I'll be glad to drive you down to the station."

"What I need is food, darlin'. I'd like to pick up a pizza."

"Pizza?" Andrea began to laugh. The absurdity of his request broke the tension. "There isn't a pizza parlor closer than the county seat, and that's ten miles away. This is the country, Mr. Farley. Everything is closed at this hour."

"Great. And I swore," he drawled solemnly, "that I'd never be hungry again."

The man was hopeless. She was beginning to doubt that he was even acquainted with Miss Mamie. Andrea would have known if he'd ever been in Arcadia before. If she hadn't, somebody else would have. Sam Farley was a man who wouldn't be easily forgotten. She knew she ought to be firm, in charge. Yet every time he relaxed his stern manner, he knocked her off balance. Even covered with dirt, cobwebs, and blood, he was ... *blood!*

"Mr. Farley," she gasped, forgetting her confusion. "You're hurt."

"Not in a place you can see, Chief."

"But you're bleeding." He was injured. What had happened to him? She couldn't have done that. She'd hit him in the stomach. Maybe she'd been wrong about him. Maybe he'd robbed a bank and been shot. Maybe he'd been in a car wreck and that was why he had to walk. What kind of police officer was she?

"I'm sorry I hit you. Don't worry, Mr. Farley," she reassured him weakly. "As a police officer, I've been trained to handle emergencies. There is a first-aid kit in the car." She took a deep breath and hoped that the injury wasn't serious.

"You're in charge, Chief. Whatever you say. You realize that I could claim police brutality. What's the penalty for that in Arcadia?"

"Police brutality?" Andrea gave an incredulous shrug. "Why would you want to do that?"

Buck. I'll get Buck, was Andrea's first thought. She'd turned toward the door before she remembered that Buck's leg was encased in white plaster with two little hearts drawn in the center by the nurse in the county hospital emergency room.

Wait a minute, Andrea told herself sternly. She wouldn't let this man rattle her. She was the chief of police. She'd have to treat the injured man herself. What to do first?

Andrea forced herself to face the fact that, beyond covering it with a Band-Aid, she hadn't the wildest notion of what to do with a wound. Her first day as chief of police of Arcadia was turning into a complete disaster. She'd just admit to police brutality and take him straight to the hospital.

Sam moved closer to the fire to examine the bright slash of blood across his chest and shoulder. He removed his shirt and stood obediently in the firelight.

"Okay, darlin', examine me. I'm yours."

Andrea caught her breath and swallowed the sound welling up in her throat. He was even more magnificent without his shirt. She guessed him to be in his early thirties. Whatever else he was, Sam Farley was a man of the earth. His upper body was nicked with scars. He obviously was used to physical work. His skin was bronzed a golden color that picked up the rosy tones from the fire. Except for ...

"Mr. Farley! What is ... *that*?"

Sam glanced from the disbelieving expression on her face to himself and back again, before breaking into a grin. "You mean my tattoo?"

He turned so that Andrea could get the full benefit of the large pink heart with the word *MOTHER* etched across his upper arm.

"What do you think of it?"

"What any woman would think. That all you need is an earring and a motorcycle. It's disgustingly barbaric."

"Not every woman," he contradicted softly. "My mother liked it." He held up his shirt and examined the blood once more. "I think that we'd better examine you, Chief. This blood isn't mine."

"Me?" She faltered, looking from the shirt he was holding to her own. There wasn't a spot on it. What was he saying? "Certainly not, Mr. Farley. If there's something wrong with me, I'll wait until I get back to the station and check it out."

"Nonsense. I could have hurt you earlier. We can't take a chance on a thing like that. I'm good in emergencies."

"I hardly think we have an emergency here," Andrea began shakily as she took a step backward. "My vital functions aren't impaired."

"I'm not too sure about that, darling. We won't know until we check you over, will

we?” He started toward her, his serious gaze on her face. “Turnabout is fair play. I insist, Chief Fleming. Take off your shirt.”

Andrea gasped. "You're crazy, certifiably insane." She backed out of the parlor and into the hall. "Don't touch me. They know where I am back at the station."

Sam stopped, spread his legs, and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, watching through nearly closed eyes. He hadn't meant to scare her. He was only teasing. He'd better set her straight before she called in the cavalry.

Andrea was holding up both fists, her body set in a boxer's stance. "If I don't get back, the whole county will be after you. Louise Roberts knows what you look like," she warned.

"After me?" he said dryly. "Put down your dukes, Chief. Who do you think I am? I'm not going anywhere, at least not yet. I'm sorry if I frightened you. I think the blood on my shirt must have come from your head. All I want to do is look."

Andrea glared at him suspiciously. She realized that she was responding to him as a woman, not as the chief of police. But at the moment she was having trouble keeping the situation professional. Being teased by a dark-eyed stranger was new to her.

In the end it was his mouth that told her she had nothing to fear. As she watched, his tightly drawn lips began to soften. She remembered Louise's description of a frown to cover his real feelings.

"Are you all right, Chief?"

Louise was right. Underneath his tough-guy manner, he was worried about her.

"You must have cut your head when you fell. Then you brushed against my shoulder when we, when I ... when the lightning struck." He held out his hand. "Come over by the fire and let me see."

It took some strong doing, but gradually she began to relax and see the situation for what it was. The only danger she was in was the risk of being caught up in the moment. Sam Farley was just different from the men in Arcadia. He was a stranger with a confident way of looking at life that was new to her.

"All right, cowboy, but I want to know why you're here," she said with authority in her voice.

"Fine," he agreed. "Come over here by the fire and let me examine your head, and I'll level with you."

He added more logs to the fire, uncovered an overstuffed couch in the shadows, and pulled it toward the fireplace, inviting her to sit down.

"My name is Sam Farley, I swear it. I was born in Texas. Lived all over the West while I was growing up. My mother liked oil and the men who found it."

"An oil man? I thought you were a cowboy."

"Only by birth. I was born in Texas. I'm a carpenter. I build things—houses, furniture,

cabinets. If it's made of wood, I can do it. Millie Hines was my mother. Mamie Hines was my grandmother. I have no brothers and no sisters, and unless my mother had family that she never mentioned, I'm guess you could say I'm all alone."

"I can't imagine being completely alone in the world ...," Andrea said softly as she lowered herself to the edge of the couch, "... without any family or friends. At least I still have Buck."

Sam wondered a moment at her use of the word *still*. He liked the way she talked, all warm and soft and slow, like a woman after she'd been made love to. He shrugged his shoulders as he answered in a tone made sharp by the impossibility of his thoughts. "Maybe, but I don't owe anything to anybody. There is nobody to tie me down, and I go where I choose."

"And where have you chosen to be, Sam Farley?"

"Home has been wherever the work was, darlin'. I've built quarters for the workers on the Alaskan pipeline, rebuilt hospitals after the earthquake in Mexico, helped put up shopping centers all over the country, and even restored one of the houses in Williamsburg. There aren't many places in the country I haven't seen. What about you?"

She was subdued, gazing at him with the wonder of a little girl listening to the story of Sinbad or Cinderella. The flames bit into the new logs, lifting orange tongues up the chimney. "Me? I ... really haven't been anywhere, and I'm not going to. I stay right here, in Arcadia, because I choose to."

There was something so final about her words that Sam found himself leaning forward, reaching out to comfort her, involuntarily touching her cheek before realizing his mistake. He moved his fingertips to her hair and waited for her to accept his caress before he began his inspection. When she didn't say anything, he gently parted her hair and began to explore. Then she flinched.

"Here, I found it. The cut is just a small nick on the scalp, nothing serious. It's already stopped bleeding."

Andrea felt a blush creep across her face. She moved her head away from his disturbing touch, dismissing her strange feelings with a practical question. "What about your father? Was he in construction too?"

"My father? Never had one, at least so far as I know. Didn't bother me, but my mother seemed to think that would be a problem for the home folks."

Andrea regarded him with new understanding. Beneath the teasing cowboy rogue, she glimpsed the brooding uncertainty that he tried to hide.

"I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he said roughly, as though he'd revealed too much. "Being here in the house is getting to me, I guess."

She decided that not having a father bothered him more than he would admit. Choosing her words carefully, she provided an answer to his unasked question. "I think your grandmother would be very pleased to know you've come."

"My mother always said we'd come back here someday, but we never did," he said, continuing to stare into the fire. "I never knew why she left. Coming back was important to her, yet she always put it off. Then she got sick, and it was too late." As he watched the flames dancing eagerly about the old dry logs, the lines in his face

gradually relaxed.

“Miss Mamie’s been gone for two years. Why did it take you so long? Were you that busy?”

He turned and ambled to the window, glancing out as though he found standing still a problem. “There’s a place in Alaska where you can stand on top of a mountain and the sky is so full of stars that you want to reach up and take a few in your hand. There’s a windswept beach on Baja that’s so pretty, it seems unreal. There’s a whole world out there, and I’ve only seen a part of it. It’s been hard for me to stop wandering long enough to come here.”

“You know they’re about to auction off the property for taxes. Nobody knew how to reach your mother.”

He looked back at her, frowning. “I know. I found the auction notice in my mother’s papers when—” he hesitated for a second, dropped his voice, and walked back to the fire, “after she died.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Andrea fought back the urge to go to his side and lay a comforting hand on his tense shoulder. Instead she said quietly, “You’re still in time to pay the taxes and claim the land, if you choose.”

He looked at her in surprise as though that thought had never occurred to him. “Me? Stay in a wide place in the road like this?” His tone was one of disbelief, overwhelmed with scorn. “Darlin’, do I look like a small-town boy?”

“No, I guess not.” Andrea shook her head and watched his mouth tighten.

“I’ve got a little money left, but not enough for that, even if I wanted to stay. For the moment all I’m good for is ... a little food, a little wine, and—” he paused, turned his frown into a rakish grin, “*thou*, providing you don’t have expensive tastes. No, I’m not going to claim the homeplace, except for the night. I guess I just wanted to see it once.”

‘Thou’? Andrea considered his flirtatious words in silence. The rain had turned into an intermittent drizzle, the little moments of quiet coming like a pause for breath.

She watched him stand and put his shirt back on.

“What if we go get some pizza and beer?”

“Pizza and beer? Take the patrol car across the county line?” Andrea laughed, even though she knew from the look in his eyes that he was serious.

“Sure. I’m starving. Where’s your southern hospitality, darlin’?”

The cowboy persona was back, grinning at her without a care in the world, disregarding rules and glibly suggesting that she disregard them too. “Mr. Farley ...”

“No ‘mister,’ just Sam.”

“Sam, this is Arcadia, Georgia. You don’t understand about my town. If I took you out for a beer, by tomorrow morning *everybody* would know. Besides, I’m on duty, and I take my job seriously.”

“I can already see that you have a problem, darlin’. You’re entirely too serious. Before I leave, I’m going to have to teach you to lighten up and have some fun. I’ve been told that I’m a very good teacher.”

Sam wasn’t sure why he was flirting with Andrea. She wasn’t a pizza-and-beer kind of woman. Something about her worried at his confidence and wouldn’t let go. Seeing that

she wasn't warming up to the idea of taking him out, he tried a different approach. "Surely," he said, making his expression look pitiful, "it's your *duty* to keep a man from starving to death?"

"You're right," she agreed enthusiastically as inspiration hit her. "An officer of the law has a duty to help someone in need. And a Fleming always does his, eh, her duty." She remembered the thermos of coffee and the homemade cookies that Louise had sent to Buck, still on the front seat of her car. "Show me your identification, and I'll find you something to eat."

"Agreed." He buttoned the last button and grinned at her. The heels of his boots clattered on the wooden floor as he strode into the hallway and disappeared into the darkness. "I'll get my wallet. It's in my backpack."

Andrea glanced at her watch, anxious now to get back to town. He was an intriguing man, this grandson of Mamie Hines's, with his rangy build, broad shoulders, and narrow waist. But it was his intensity that caught at her emotions. She could easily imagine him standing on a windswept beach or on a snow-covered hill in Alaska. She also imagined that with his bad-boy good looks and charm, he wouldn't be standing alone.

It was almost ten o'clock. She'd been away from the station too long. If Buck called in, he'd be worried. She'd better find her gun and her cap, then head back to town. If Sam Farley wanted to stay in this boarded-up house with no electricity, she wasn't going to argue tonight.

Andrea took a burning limb from the fire and held it aloft like a torch as she searched the shadows. With a sigh of relief, she spotted the pistol laying at the base of the lace-curtained front door. She replaced it in her holster and buttoned the restraining loop over it.

"I seem to have a problem, Chief." Sam said from the hallway behind her.

"Oh?" Andrea felt a sense of dread fall over her. She knew what he was going to say before he said it.

"I seem to have misplaced my wallet. My money, my identification, and all my papers are inside it."

"Of course you did." Andrea began edging her way down the hallway past him. She didn't know what kind of game he was playing now, but she knew that chief or not, she needed to put some distance between them.

"Now, wait a minute, Chief. I do have a wallet. I just can't seem to find it. Unless ... wait a minute. That old farmer, the one who gave me a ride."

"I suppose one of our citizens picked your pocket?" Andrea said without thinking, then wished she'd kept silent. Let him concoct his story. He could tell it to Buck tomorrow.

"I threw my pack in the back of his truck. With all the bouncing around that truck did, the wallet must have fallen out. Come on, Chief, you probably know the man. His tractor had broken down, and he'd been somewhere to get a new part. Name was Otis something-or-other."

"Parker," Andrea supplied with relief. Otis always had something broken down. "Fine, we'll have a talk with Otis tomorrow and see if he knows anything about your wallet. In

the meantime, I'll forget about any charge of breaking-and-entering tonight, but you'd better be able to prove who you are tomorrow, or you'd better be gone."

Andrea spotted her cap on the floor, picked it up, and slipped past Sam Farley into the kitchen. "Good night, Sam."

"Wait a minute, Chief. What about my food?" He dropped in behind the woman who was charging out the door and striding down the drive.

Food. She'd promised to feed him. Andrea brushed back a lock of wet hair and remembered that she'd left her rain slicker on the porch. "All right, cowboy, come with me."

"Thanks. The rain seems to be stopping," Sam said as he caught up with her. "But this drive's a swamp. Don't you folks believe in asphalt out here in the country?"

Asphalt. Oh, dear. Sam's appearance was going to be a big surprise to Ed Pinyon. He had his eye on buying Mamie's property to use as storage space for his paving equipment. He'd even mentioned building new sand and gravel pits—if he could get the land for the price of the back taxes.

"Certainly. We have a fine paving and equipment company." Andrea said, mentally defending a friend. Ed Pinyon was Arcadia's only yuppie, Meredith County's future representative to the state government, and Ed Pinyon was the man her father expected her to marry.

They reached the patrol car at the foot of the drive. Andrea opened the door and started to get in, using the door as a barrier between them. "But there are some of us who like our town old-fashioned and unsophisticated."

The clouds seemed to part, and a sliver of moonlight cut a wedge across the road where they stood.

Sam rested his arms loosely across the upper edge of the car window and leaned across. "And muddy. What's for dinner, Stormy lady?"

"Stormy?" She made the mistake of gazing directly into his eyes and found herself snared by their intensity. She caught her breath and hoped he hadn't heard her gasp. Then he touched her face. He drew a callused finger across her lips, and they parted involuntarily. Andrea realized suddenly that he was going to kiss her.

"Don't," she protested in a throaty whisper.

"Too late," he said, feathering light kisses across her cheek and back to her lips.

"No!" She pulled away. "You're an outsider, and I won't let you come in here and ..."

"And kiss you?" he finished almost inaudibly. "I know. You're not the type to run wild with someone like me, but it'd sure be fun to teach you how."

Andrea sat down in the patrol car and slammed the door shut. She backed down the drive and drove away. In her rearview mirror she could still see the silhouette of a man, a cowboy with a heart tattoo across his arm, a wicked smile, and eyes that seemed to see right through a person.

Then she realized what she'd done. She'd promised Sam Farley food, and it was still in the car. She applied the brakes and reversed her direction. He was still standing in the drive, his face drawn into a frown. She opened the window and handed him the thermos and the plate of cookies.

He didn't speak, and neither did she.

When Andrea drove away this time, she pulled off her cap, lowered all the windows, and felt the hot night air whip her hair wildly behind her like the sail of a phantom ship. The storm was over, leaving her restless and confused. She pressed down on the accelerator. Tonight she had a need to fly like the wind.

"You shouldn't have gone over there by yourself, Andy," her father grumbled as he crawled into the back of the patrol car and positioned his cast across the seat.

"Buck," Andrea replied, more sharply than she'd intended, "I didn't do anything you wouldn't have done. A call came in, and I investigated it. It's that simple."

"Yes," Buck agreed reluctantly. "But suppose you'd found a burglar instead of some man who claims to be Mamie Hines's grandson? A fact, I'll remind you, that we're still not certain of. I remember about five years ago, a convict broke out in Hancock County and robbed a woman—"

"Buck, please. It isn't even eight A.M. Let it rest. Sam Farley might be a little wild-looking, but I think he's okay. By the way, I gave him the homemade cookies that Louise Roberts *made especially for you*."

"That woman, she ought not ..." Buck said in exasperation. "Cookies? My daughter gave my chocolate-chip cookies, with nuts, to that stranger?"

Andrea was having a hard time holding back a smile at Buck's overplayed reaction. "Yes, but somehow I expect that there'll be more. Buck, did you know Miss Mamie's daughter?"

"Everybody knew Millie. She was the prettiest girl in the county when she was sixteen, and the apple of her daddy's eye until she met that fellow over at the army base."

"Sam's father?"

"Who knows? The man she ran off with wasn't named Farley. Don't know what happened after she left here. Jed Hines was a hard man, Andy. When he said he no longer had a daughter, he meant it. Never let her name be mentioned again. I always thought Mamie would have found some way to keep in touch with her."

As Andrea drove Buck into town, she thought about Sam's mother and what she must have gone through, having a parent disown her. Andrea rarely thought about it anymore, but her own mother had been an outsider, too, and she'd run away from Arcadia and her child. Buck had explained that her mother had felt closed-in and suppressed.

Andrea had learned long ago to stop wondering what had caused her mother to desert them. She had spent her childhood blaming herself—and Arcadia—for somehow not being good enough to hold her mother's affection. She'd learned as she grew older that there was no blame. Just as there had been no blaming David.

David, the state patrolman with snapping black eyes and an air of wicked excitement, had come into her life when she was twenty. She'd fallen in love without a thought that he'd ever leave her. But he had. Like her mother, he'd marched to the beat of a different

drummer. Neither had belonged in a small southern town. Maybe her mother, David, and Sam Farley had something in common. Sam would leave, too, sooner or later.

Andrea dropped Buck at the Arcadia Café for his usual breakfast with his cronies and continued to city hall. Even before they'd left home that morning, the phone had begun to ring. Otis Parker reported that a Sam Farley had hitchhiked into town with him. He didn't know about any wallet, but he'd look and get back to Buck.

At city hall, Andrea turned on the office lights, switched on the ceiling fan, and checked in with Agnes at the local phone company. "I'm at the police station, Agnes, and Buck's at the café if anybody needs either of us."

"How about Mamie's grandson? Is he really some dirty, wild-looking hippie?"

"No, Agnes. He is not some wild hippie." Andrea retorted with a sigh. "He's somewhere between thirty and thirty-five, and he seems nice. But he's not here to stay. You might as well let everybody in town know that he's just passing through. He wanted to see his grandmother's house before it was sold."

"Excuse me," Agnes replied coolly. "I was just curious." Agnes's police-department service was unofficial and self-appointed, but if anyone needed help, she was always there—she or one of the other Varner sisters. The telephone company had belonged to her family for nearly fifty years. During the daytime hours she was a one-woman operator. Her younger sister took over at night, and the older one filled in on weekends. All anybody in town who wanted to know what was happening, where anybody was, or the time of day had to do was pick up the telephone, and one of the Varners had the answer.

Now Agnes was miffed with the new chief of police, and everybody would know it. Andrea sighed. Staying on the good side of the citizens in a small town was akin to walking on hot coals without getting burned. There were some things about her town she'd like to change.

Andrea deliberately forced any reference to their temporary guest from her mind. The less she dwelled on him, the better. But he was like the forbidden apple in her own private Garden of Eden, sliding into her thoughts like a snake. The sound of snoring in the back drew her attention, and she realized that the city's handyman-meter reader, Brad Dixon, was sleeping off a binge in one of the cells, as was his habit.

Buck didn't return. The phone rang constantly.

"Andy, what time is choir practice?"

"How's Buck doing?"

Every question was followed by a casual reference to Sam Farley. By the time she'd answered the eight call, her mood hovered somewhere between exasperation and total frustration. Sam Farley didn't deserve this much attention. He was just a man, a vagabond carpenter who told stories of faraway places she'd never seen and didn't want to, a drifter who'd kissed her.

She didn't mean anything to him, and neither had the kiss. She was just the next girl down the road on the way to all those places he hadn't seen yet. He was simply passing through.

Andrea didn't want to think about how he'd made her feel or the way his voice had

sounded when he called her Stormy. She sprang to her feet and marched back to Brad Dixon's cell. It was long past time for him to be up and pretending to earn the salary the city paid him.

"Brad! Brad, wake up! You've got water meters to read." Andrea roused the half-asleep employee out of the cell and headed him toward the barber shop for a morning-after cold shower and black coffee.

Andrea glanced toward the café. Buck appeared to be taking the morning off. Well, she had city business to carry out. There was still the problem of Sam Farley's identification to be settled. She climbed into the patrol car and cut down a side street that passed the old cotton gin and the post office. She was going out to the Hines place, and she was taking the back road.

Three

In the daylight Mamie's house no longer looked frightening. With its peeling paint and sagging porch it just seemed faded and tired.

The walk up the driveway was easier this time. Andrea didn't know why she'd been so spooked the previous night. She loved this sprawling old house, and Mamie's grandson was welcome in her town.

She knocked lightly at the back-porch door, listening for some indication of movement inside. When there was no response, she pushed against the screen. It was locked, and the rip in the screen had been covered with a block of wood.

"Hello? Sam? Mr. Farley? Are you there?" She shaded her eyes from the bright glare of morning sun, peered into the screened-in porch, and knocked again.

"And what can I do for the chief of police this morning?"

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she saw him, rumpled from sleep, wearing nothing but jeans that rode low on his hips. He was leaning against the doorframe between the kitchen and the porch, drinking coffee from one of Louise Roberts's orange mugs.

"You've locked the door," she said. "Are you afraid?"

"No, ma'am. I'm hiding from your welcome wagon. It started with some little woman you-hooing at my door before I was up. Why are you here, Chief?"

Andrea stiffened. Sam Farley was angry. She didn't know what she'd expected, but it hadn't been anger. Where was the fun-loving rogue who'd wanted pizza and beer the night before? She couldn't decide what it was about the man that irritated her so. Maybe she wasn't the only one having second thoughts about what had happened between them. When she walked up the drive, she'd expected more teasing, more tales of adventure maybe. But not antagonism.

She made her voice light and friendly. "People are just curious about you. You've never lived in a small town before, have you, Sam?"

"Once," he said wryly. "I won't be so stupid a second time. Besides, I don't know what your caring town did to my mother, and I'm not taking any chances on finding out. So let's just get to the point."

Sam knew that he was being deliberately cruel to someone who didn't deserve it. He didn't understand his actions. But spending the night in the house had had a curious effect on him. He'd uncovered a bed in the front room that overlooked the slope down to the road. Somehow he'd known it had been his mother's room, and the questions had whirled round and round in his mind. Why had she run away from a town where people cared about each other? Why had she been so unhappy here?

Finally he'd given up and returned to the parlor. He'd stretched out on the couch and

dreamed of Andrea's stormy blue eyes half closed in passion as he made love to her under the plum tree in the field beyond.

Desire—that was an emotion he could understand. But this little side trip into his past had taken a wrong turn somewhere and had kept on going. He wasn't sure where it was leading him.

People like Andrea and Louise Roberts confused him. He didn't mean anything to them, and he didn't trust them. Why were they so hell-bent on making him feel as though they cared?

"Look, I'm sorry, Sam. Outsiders always accuse us of being nosy, bossy, and even a little prideful. Here in Arcadia we do feel a responsibility for each other. I just came by to offer you a ride to the grocery store, if you still need food."

"So now you're making me a neighbor, are you? Look, I know you mean well, but I'm not staying here. And I'll manage by myself."

"Fine," Andrea said, calling on every ounce of dignity she could muster. She didn't even know why she'd offered. A drifter like Sam Farley couldn't appreciate small-town caring anyway. "But there are a couple of official questions I have to ask you. Look, couldn't you open the door? It's hot out here in this sun."

"I don't think so," he said stiffly. "I don't want soup, cookies, homemade preserves, or companionship." He glanced down at the orange mug and sat it on the floor with a clatter. "And I don't want to end up jailed by your vigilante committee."

"Vigilante committee? Has something happened out here this morning, Sam?" she asked in confusion.

"Your friends expressed the opinion that I'd best not take advantage of a—" he looked at the ceiling, "how did they put it? A 'sweet woman who's taken on her daddy's job.' So call off your watchdogs."

"Who were these watchdogs?" Andrea's look of bewilderment seemed genuine.

"That character spitting fire on my doorstep awhile ago, the one with crutches."

"Buck? My father? How'd he get here?"

"He came with Otis to protect your honor and make sure that I knew you were off-limits."

Andrea felt herself growing furious. So *that* was why Buck had taken the morning off. She should have known.

"Don't worry, cowboy, I'll take care of it," she promised grimly, rubbing her forehead. "I'm sorry. Sometimes ... people here are too protective."

"Well, you can just tell them that they don't have a thing to worry about. I'm not going to play footsie with the future governor's wife."

Andrea held onto her rising temper until she could speak calmly. " 'Future governor's wife'? Look, I'm sorry about those two. They were out of line."

Sam almost laughed. It wasn't the vigilantes who disturbed him. He was already disturbed, and the woman standing in front of him was the reason.

Andrea Fleming didn't look like a future governor's wife. She was tall, built like some kind of pioneer woman, with a slim waist, large breasts that rose and fell in evidence of her aggravation with him, and hips that would deliver children with ease. Her skin was

tanned and glowed with the warmth of the sun. Her dark, rich hair had already begun to slide from the knot she'd pinned at the back of her neck. This time her blue eyes were shooting fire instead of lightning. She was controlled but very angry.

Sam should tell her that Otis had returned the lost wallet with the identification and paperwork that proved he was Mamie's grandson. He surmised that the stout, balding man on crutches who'd identified himself as Andrea's father, Buck, had probably already gone through his wallet, for he'd asked only what Sam's intentions were.

Rather than cause a problem, Sam had walked outside and explained quietly that Andrea had only made certain that he was all right. He admitted that he should have checked in at the police station in town, but it had been raining and he'd been tired. He'd said he was sorry if he'd caused any trouble.

Finally the man looked up at him with squinted eyes and said, "All right, Sam Farley. Since you're Mamie's grandson, I'll let it go—for now. But you'd better watch your step, or you'll end up in jail."

Buck Fleming couldn't have known how effective the threat had been. Jail? He'd been down that road before. No way was Sam Farley going to jail over a wish to see his grandmother's house or the overwhelming desire to hold Andrea Fleming in his arms.

He'd decided he'd leave, but he'd found himself delaying his departure. Only at this moment did he admit it was because he'd hoped she would return. Now she was standing at his door, her wide eyes a dark blue in the shadows. She'd visited him this morning out of friendship, nothing more.

Sam had the feeling that if he did what he wanted and kissed her again, she'd arrest him, apologizing in her slow, sensual drawl all the way to town.

He liked to hear her speak. The honeyed tones of her voice made him think of sunshine and cornfields. He'd heard another voice like that long ago, a voice that had painted comforting pictures of a white house and a swing, in a town where everybody was worth knowing. Unconsciously he'd been searching for that voice. Now that he'd found it, what he was feeling scared the hell out of him. Abruptly Sam unlatched the screen. "Come in. I've never had the future governor's wife come to call."

Future governor's wife! Buck! She was going to have to talk to her father about that boast. Andrea was embarrassed and a little uneasy. She didn't like that. In Arcadia everybody was as at-home in a neighbor's house as they were in their own.

Andrea's first inclination was to tell Sam that she hadn't accepted anybody's proposal. Ed Pinyon was her father's choice—not hers. But she didn't. Her personal life was ... personal. Her business with him was just that—business.

She realized that she'd been staring at him in silence for a long moment. The skeptical lift of his eyebrow and the crinkling of the corners of his mouth signaled the fact that he recognized her confusion. Andrea blushed. He was getting to her again, without even trying. His chin was covered with an even heavier stubble now, stubble that would soon be a luxurious beard covering a face that was lined from being outdoors a lot. His smile was full now as he waited for her decision.

"No thanks. If you're not interested in my help, I'll be on my way. But I'll need that identification, sooner or later."

He knew he'd been testing her. Subtly, without being aware, he'd allowed himself to slip from behind the wall of impersonal banter he'd learned to erect between himself and the women he met along the way. Suddenly he wanted to know this woman. He didn't want her to go.

"Wait, there is one thing you can help with," he said slowly. "My grandmother managed to live here without a shower, and there doesn't seem to be any water. I'd like to take a bath. Have any suggestions?"

Andrea considered her answer. She could tell him of the pool up the hill beyond the trees. Miss Mamie had shared it with her once. "Jed damned it up for Millie," Miss Mamie had said, the only time she'd ever mentioned the daughter who'd run away. But Andrea didn't feel right about sharing that information—not yet. If Sam found it, then it was his.

Instead she answered his question. "If you look around, I think you'll find a galvanized washtub somewhere in the barn, Sam. I'd fill it with water from that well in the corner of the porch."

"A galvanized washtub?" He looked at her in disbelief.

Andrea tilted her head slightly as she added, "Of course. But this is Friday, and I thought cow-boys always took their weekly baths on Saturday night."

Sam suppressed a smile. "But I'm not a cowboy, remember?" He took an envelope of papers from the table and placed the material in Andrea's hand. "Just be certain to return those when you're finished."

Andrea glanced woodenly down at the papers and the rough, callused hand that had not only placed the envelope in her grasp but was now holding *her* hand. The sandpaper texture of his thumb rubbed the underside of her wrist, and she felt her pulse jump as she stared at them.

"You found them." She pulled her hand away and forced herself to look up at him.

"No. Otis did. In the back of his truck." He was close enough now to see the blue in her eyes change color as they widened. Sam felt the tension flare between them. *Oh, no you don't, Stormy*, he told himself. *You're not feeding my flame again.* But she was, standing there with that smoldering light in her eyes. He had to fight the strong urge to pull her inside the house and into his arms.

Sam frowned. This lack of control was new to him. He took a deep breath, lifted her hand uneasily, and forced a smile on his face. "Don't suppose you'd like to stick around and scrub my back, would you, darlin'? Wouldn't that be considered the neighborly thing to do?"

Andrea let out a deep breath. "But you don't want to be a neighbor, Sam Farley. Better relock this door if you're going to bathe on the porch," she advised briskly. "It's likely that welcoming neighbors will continue to visit you until they learn that you aren't interested in being friends." She lifted the envelope. "I'll get your papers back to you as soon as I've checked them over."

"Whatever you say, Chief Fleming. You're the boss."

This time Andrea didn't answer. She simply turned on her heel and strode down the over-grown drive.

Sam watched the suggestive roll of her hips as she walked. A real earth mother, he thought, remembering the firmness of her breast beneath his touch when he'd first discovered that she was a woman. She was a nearly irresistible challenge if he were inclined to take the risk. He's always thrived on danger, and he'd never made love to a policewoman. Still, this was one time he wasn't sure he wanted to get involved. This woman wasn't into fun and games. This woman was the church-on-Sunday, till-death-do-us-part type. This woman could land him in jail.

He swore and turned back inside, wondering what the hell he was doing in a boarded-up old house with no electricity and no food.

Sam walked barefoot through the house and stood on the front porch. He watched until Andrea drove away. He should have thanked her for her concern, but maybe being nice to her was a mistake. He couldn't afford to let her know that she'd gotten under his skin and made him crave something he didn't trust, something he'd never have.

Sam spotted a fruit tree, heavy with fat golden plums. He smiled. He liked looking out and not seeing another house or person anywhere. He liked the privacy. He wished he could believe that people were so trusting here that they never locked their doors.

Sam stuck his hands in his jean pockets and glanced around at the dilapidated old house. It was a lot like him—abandoned and falling apart. Well, hell, it wouldn't hurt to leave his grandmother's home a little better off than he'd found it. Maybe he'd clear the drive before Andrea came back. Maybe he'd check out the attic and the barn out back.

Could be, he'd find that porch swing.

Buck was sitting with his plastered leg propped on the desk with the last of the breakfast coffee in one hand and a chocolate-chip cookie in the other. "Where've you been, Andy—it's almost ten o'clock?"

"A better question might be where have *you* been, Buck?"

"What makes you think I've been anywhere?"

"For one thing you're eating chocolate-chip cookies. For another, I went back out to the Hines place to check on Sam Farley. He told me that you and Otis had been out. How *dare* you go there and threaten Sam Farley, as if I couldn't take care of myself!"

"I wasn't checking up on you, Andy." He looked sheepish as she glared at him. "Oh, all right. Yes, I was," he admitted. "I heard you tossing and turning in your bed after you got home last night. You've been doing that a lot lately. Louise thinks ... I mean, I was just worried."

"You talked with Louise Roberts about me? Great!" Andrea slapped her desktop and turned away from Buck's puzzled expression while she tried to calm herself. Why shouldn't Buck talk to Louise about her? Why was she getting so angry?

"I'm sorry, Andy. I just think sometimes that I haven't done a very good job raising you. A woman might understand certain things ... better."

"You've done fine, Buck. We've done fine, just the two of us. I didn't mean to worry you. I thought it was my duty," she said slowly, "to go back and check on Sam Farley's identification, after you *disappeared*."

"I didn't 'disappear.' I was having coffee with Otis and Mamie's lawyer, Stuart Traylor."

Buck's injured tone didn't soothe Andrea for a moment, not even when he added proudly, "Stuart says that Mamie's will is on file over at the courthouse in Cottonboro. Judge Thomas is having a copy made up for us."

Mamie's will. Andrea hadn't thought of that. But then she hadn't thought about anything except a stranger with a heart-shaped tattoo who was sentimental about his mother. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to check it out," she snapped. "But in the future, stop taking care of me."

Andrea could tell that Buck was surprised at her outburst. As the phone rang and he answered it with unusual irritation, she realized that he too had had a steady trickle of citizens who just happened by the café to hear about the "wild-looking" stranger.

"All right, Andy," he agreed as he was hanging up the phone. "I just don't want to see you hurt. Sam may be all right. In fact he kinda reminds me of myself when I was his age. But a man like Ed, a man from Meredith County, is the kind of man you belong with."

"Buck, I'm twenty-six years old—a woman, not some teenager to be protected and supervised. I'm not going to marry Ed Pinyon. I'll pick out the man I want."

"But not this man, Andy. He's not one of us." Buck pleaded with a glazed look in his eyes that said he was thinking of her mother. He added hesitantly, "I know you're not a child anymore. I just get in the habit of acting like a father, and I charge ahead without thinking. We know Ed. We don't know this boy, even if he does have a claim here. Be careful."

Andrea sighed and leaned over to kiss his bald head. "Oh, Pop, I'm overreacting too. He's just passing through, and I understand what you're saying. He'll soon be gone, you'll be mobile again, and life will be back to normal."

And you'll have to find some other explanation for my tossing and turning at night, because I haven't.

"No, you're right," Buck was saying. "It was a father who went over to Mamie's place, Andy, not a police officer. Sam Farley comes from good stock. I ought to give him a chance. But we still need Mamie's will."

"Fine. Here are his records. You look them over. I'll drive over to the courthouse and pick up the will before lunch."

Andrea didn't tell Buck that she intended to send off an inquiry to the state-patrol headquarters. She didn't doubt what Sam Farley said about himself. She just wanted to know what the world said about Sam Farley.

Andrea drove slowly down Main Street, nodding at Mrs. Bryan overseeing her gardener as he pushed a mower across a perfectly manicured, postage-size front yard. She passed the mayor's two-story white mansion with the little balcony over the front door and paused while a dump truck backed into the new subdivision at the edge of the city limits. Her town was growing, and she had mixed feelings about the alterations.

She kept to the old highway going to Cottonboro, the same highway that had brought Sam Farley to Arcadia. Everything was green and fresh, droplets of water still glistening

on the rich green leaves of corn standing thigh-high. The unofficial start of summer was still a month away, but spring had come early this year, and the wheatfields on her left were already ankle-high. In a few weeks they'd be cut and shaped into great rolls like huge yellow-brown jelly rolls.

There was a continuity about her county, a continuity on which she could depend. She couldn't understand "dropping by" a place. She'd attended the same elementary and high schools that her father had attended, and her children would follow her. Tradition was important because it made a mark by which each new generation would be measured. More than that, it kept her from worrying about the future.

She was about two miles out of town when she saw the man walking up the road. It was the boots and the whiplash-tight body that gave him away. Sam Farley, clean-shaven and wearing a sweat-stained tan Stetson, was walking lazily up the highway with one hand out, his thumb stuck casually into the air. He was leaving. No, she realized, he wasn't wearing a backpack. She stopped the patrol car beside him as he turned.

"Enjoying the scenery, Mr. Farley?"

A peculiar expression crossed his face. She had the idea that he wasn't pleased to see her, though his words indicated the opposite.

"Nice to see you again, Chief. Are you picking me up?"

The amused teasing in his lazy voice ran along her nerve endings, almost daring her to comply. Andrea was careful to appear relaxed as she answered. "Sure, but you're heading the wrong way to get to the interstate."

"I'm headed for the county seat." He flicked his hat back on his head, opened the car door, and slid inside.

"Oh? Why?"

His gaze swept over her leisurely, and something warm coiled in her stomach.

"I've decided that I owe it to my mother to at least talk to the tax man about my ... the property."

"Your property? Why?"

"I'm thinking that maybe I could fix the house up a bit while I'm here. Who knows? I might find some work around here and stay for a while. If not, at least the house won't look so deserted. Do you have a problem with that, Chief?" He frowned.

"You're thinking of looking for work? Here?"

"Well, not at this particular spot in the road." He glanced over his shoulder. "Those people behind you might get impatient. Don't you think you ought to move along?"

Andrea looked in the rearview mirror at the two vehicles behind her and swapped her foot from the brake to the gas. The car leapt forward.

"Damn! Now look what you made me do." She picked up speed before turning off on a dirt road, throwing up a cloud of dust behind them.

"Is this a shortcut, Chief?"

"Shortcut?" Andrea slowed the car. All she'd had on her mind was getting away from anybody who might have been watching. She stopped the car beneath the limbs of a moss-hung oak tree edging a large tumbling stream.

“Say, this is nice.” Sam looked at the stream and the secluded surroundings, then back toward Andrea. “Do people come here to fish?”

“Mostly the local teenagers come here to—” Andrea caught herself and amended her sentence, “they like it out here. Not much privacy in Arcadia.” *Why didn’t I just say yes?* she asked herself desperately as he grinned openly. She could tell that he was enjoying her discomfort.

“I see. Come here often, do you?”

“Hardly.” Andrea put the car in reverse and turned it around.

“Wait, Andrea.” Sam reached over and placed his hand on hers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tease you. Couldn’t we just talk for a minute? I need some advice.”

What he needed was a cold shower, a swift kick in the pants. He didn’t belong in Arcadia, Georgia, and no foolish emotional binge about having a real home was going to make him fit, even if the thought of giving it a try had occurred to him in the wee hours of the morning. Going over to talk to the tax commissioner was downright dumb.

Andrea stopped the car again, watching the change of emotion on Sam’s face. What on earth could she have to say to a vagabond man who had already traveled half the world? That he was dangerous? That he made her breathing do funny things? That she wanted to examine the heart-shaped tattoo up close and in detail, wanted to go back ten years and be one of those teenagers who parked under this old oak tree? But she’d never gone skinny-dipping in the creek then, and now it was too late. She wasn’t naive anymore.

“Talk?” If she was going to talk with him, she wanted it to be in the middle of the Arcadia High School gym with a full house.

The bright summer sun hit the hood of the squad car and glared through the window. Good, she didn’t want the conversation to be too private. With supreme effort she pulled her thinking together and forced herself to be calm.

“All right, Mr. Farley, what can I do for you?”

You can take off that hat and let your hair down the way it was the first night we met, he wanted to say. You can open that car door and go for a walk with me by the stream. We can hold hands and pretend we’re a couple of those teenagers who come to this spot for privacy, for touching and kissing.

Sam let his hand slide to the seat beside him. In spite of something in her eyes that told him she wasn’t entirely unaware of the tension that sparked between them, touching and kissing this woman would not be a smart move. He already knew what the results of that kind of thinking would be, and he wasn’t interested in either jail or marriage.

“Is there someone else waiting to pay the taxes and claim the farm if I don’t?”

Andrea thought of Ed Pinyon’s plans for the property and decided not to spoil Sam’s mental picture of the land being farmed. Knowing the truth would only spoil Sam’s memory of his mother’s home after he’d gone. “Probably, but I doubt anybody’d live here. People want new houses like they’re building in town now. They don’t appreciate the old homes like Mamie’s.”

“Oh, she’s a jewel, all right. She’s a grand old lady who just needs a little loving care.”

Andrea was startled by the genuine excitement in his voice. There was something to the man other than his ability to set off hormonal combustion inside her. “You really like old houses?”

“I’m a carpenter, remember? With the right tools and a little work, you’d be surprised how my grandmother’s house could look.”

Andrea heard confidence in his voice and pride, coupled with a kind of suppressed wistfulness that he couldn’t disguise. She hadn’t expected a house to get to him. But he did sound serious about staying in Arcadia. If he really wanted to get to the courthouse, they’d better be on their way. She released the brake and drove the car back to the highway.

“Say, do people ever swim in the stream back there?” Sam asked, rubbing perspiration from his forehead with his arm.

“Sure. Farther downstream is Minor’s Lake and a city park where Arcadia holds a Founder’s Day celebration and picnic every Fourth of July.”

“Founder’s Day celebration? Really? Tell me more about your community, Chief Fleming.”

“Arcadia was settled in the 1800s by big cotton-plantation owners. It was a gay, thriving city in its time. Then came the Civil War, and the planters lost everything. Now we have nine hundred and thirty-six residents in the city limits, with about the same number in the outlying areas.”

“Do you live on a farm, Chief?”

“No, not anymore. Our house is on a big tract of land, but Pop leases most of it out to other farmers.” Buck would be farming, Andrea could have added, if he hadn’t come home from Vietnam with a steel plate in his head that kept him from doing manual labor.

“There was a time when everybody farmed,” she continued, “until high interest rates and the drought wiped everybody out. Oh, we have a couple of manufacturing plants. But so many of our people are leaving. It’s very sad.”

“Same thing’s happening everywhere,” Sam commented. “In Texas it was the oil industry. In Pittsburgh the steel mills have problems, and out in California the computer industry isn’t what it used to be. I’m glad I work with my hands. I can always move to the next town if the one I’m in closes down.”

Andrea stole a glance at the man drumming his work-roughened fingers on the car door. She didn’t like what was happening to her county. Ed Pinyon’s construction company was the only thing expanding. She didn’t know how he did it.

Sam crinkled up his nose and squinted his eyes. “Cotton dust. I’d recognize that smell anywhere.”

“That’s the universal smell of the South, Mr. Vagabond. Ever worked on a farm?”

The odor of cotton dust wafted through the open car window and settled across Andrea like a familiar shawl. This was her world, an everlasting world she could trust, a world that would never be something other than what it appeared to be. Today her world was fresh and green.

“Not by choice. Let’s just say I’ve tried to avoid farming communities in the last few

years.”

“Why is that, Sam? Don’t farmers build things too?”

“Yes, fences—barbed-wire fences that either keep you in or out. I like concrete and steel, being high above the ground, or in the wilderness all alone. And I’m a traveling man, remember?”

Remember? How could she forget?

They reached the outskirts of Cottonboro, where the two-lane highway narrowed a little and became Court Street. Court Street led straight to the red-brick courthouse with the broken clock in the steeple. She parked the patrol car in a reserved space.

“Here you are, Mr. Farley, the Meredith County Courthouse. The tax office is on the second floor. I’ll meet you back here at the car.”

She got out and strode purposefully inside, glad that Sam hadn’t insisted on walking in with her. She didn’t need Sam around when she wanted to ask questions about him. She pushed open the judge’s door. Maybe she could find out something from Madge, his secretary. She and Madge had been friends since grammar school.

“Morning, Madge.”

“Andrea! My, don’t you look official in that uniform. Women’s liberation in Meredith County. You don’t have to tell me why the Arcadia City Council gave you the job. You already do everything else.”

“Is the judge in, Madge?”

“No, he and the sheriff had to go out—some kind of tip about a stolen tractor trailer. Crime rears its ugly head in Meredith County. But he had me make you a copy of Mamie’s will. Just leaves everything to her daughter. Not a word about anybody else. You know, we never did actually find out what happened to Millie.”

“Did anybody look?”

“Sure, when Miss Mamie died and again at tax time. They found some sort of nursing-home address for her in Mamie’s things. But she never answered our letter. In two months it will be sold for taxes if nobody claims it.”

Maybe, Andrea thought as she recalled Sam Farley’s new interest. “You never know, Madge. Somebody might want it.”

“All right, are you going to tell me? What does he look like, Andy? Do you think he really is Mamie’s grandson?”

“Who?”

“The hitchhiker that Otis picked up. Who else would I be talking about?”

“Good grief, how’d you find out?”

“You know party lines. Somebody just happened to overhear Louise Roberts and Otis’s wife talking. Does he have long hair and an earring? What does he look like?”

“He’s tall, lean, and charming, some kind of drifter. I don’t know much about him, Madge.” Andrea shook her head. “I only saw him in the dark last night and then for a ... few minutes today.”

“Last night in the dark? This gets better and better. Tell me more. What’s he doing here? Is he married?”

“Outside of checking out his grandmother’s property, I have no idea. He said he was just passing through.”

“Maybe he’s planning on staying. What do you think?”

“She thinks I should stay,” Sam said with a grin as he stepped inside the office and laid his arm casually across Andrea’s shoulder. “Ready, Chief?”

Andrea glared at him. “Will you stop that, Farley? I’m not your personal chauffeur. I just gave you a ride.” Andrea knew from Madge’s puzzled expression that she was overreacting, but she couldn’t stop herself. “And take your hands off me!”

“Sorry, Chief Fleming. You just finish up your business, and I’ll wait in the car.” Gallantly he tipped his hat to the secretaries who’d gathered in the hallway, gave Madge a big smile, then left the office, whistling merrily.

“Wow! Was *that* him?” Madge asked. “Why didn’t you tell me that he was a cross between Clint Eastwood and Ken Wahl? Now I really want to know what you meant when you said you met him *in the dark*.”

“Madge, honestly. Last night I checked out a report of a break-in at Mamie’s house. It was Sam Farley. Today I gave him a ride. That’s all there is to it. Please don’t go starting rumors.”

“Me? Start rumors, when half the single women in the country are probably outside drooling over him and you’ve already staked a claim? Never! Where are you going now?”

“Back to work,” Andrea snapped. “Forget about Sam Farley, Madge. He’s *available*, but he’s not permanent.”

“All right, if you insist on keeping him all to yourself.” Madge turned piously back to her typewriter. “Pity, how authority just seems to go to some folks’ heads.”

“Honestly, Madge, you sound like some fifteen-year-old in the throes of passion.”

“I wish,” Madge admitted with a toss of her head. “Speaking of passion, or the lack of it, will I see you and Ed at the church supper Wednesday night?”

Andrea winced and stopped. “Madge,” she said slowly, “it is not a foregone conclusion that I will be at the church with Ed. We are not engaged, in spite of the general opinion of half the county. He’s just a ... friend.”

“Well I can’t blame you. I’d go for the stranger too. Okay, okay, Andy.” Madge threw up her arms in mock self-defense as Andrea took a step toward the desk. “I’m sorry. I just thought ... I mean, you’ve been friends for nearly two years, and Ed talks like ... well, you’d better let Ed know. I’m thinking he has a different idea about that.”

Andrea knew that Madge was right. She’d allowed herself to establish a routine with Ed out of boredom. She’d been content to let things drift along, and that had been a mistake, a mistake she’d have to rectify. And now she had an even bigger mistake waiting in the police car.

In the corridor she ran into Joe Willis, the tax commissioner. “You just talked to Mamie’s grandson?”

Joe nodded. “Told him the tax deadline had passed on the place. I don’t think that I can give him an extension. But he does have the option to pay the full amount plus penalties by August first and prevent the auction.”

So much for that, Andrea thought. She doubted that Sam could come up with the full amount between now and the auction, even if he wanted to. Lost in thought, Andrea slapped the envelope containing Mamie's will against her leg as she went outside. She slipped back into the police car and buckled her seat belt.

Sam was sitting with his head back against the seat, his hat covering his face as though he were sleeping. She wanted to ask him how he felt about the tax commissioner's news but didn't want to let him know that she'd inquired. Sam already thought that small-town people were too nosy.

The morning heat glared down on the patrol car. Andrea fanned herself with the envelope containing the will. About the only things stirring in Meredith County today were telephone receivers as people gossiped about her and Sam Farley.

"Aren't you burning up?" she asked him, wondering why he wasn't more upset about the news.

"No. I like saunas."

Andrea's hair was already hanging in damp tendrils down the back of her neck. She waved at a friend across the street. The woman wore her hair in a short punk style. Andrea almost smiled as she tried to imagine what Ed Pinyon would say if she showed up at the Fourth of July picnic with spiked orange hair.

As if her thoughts had conjured him up, Ed walked out of the courthouse. He came down the steps and stopped by her open window. Darn. If she'd been a half-second quicker ...

"Andrea? What's this about you taking over Buck's job as police chief?"

"It's true—" she started to say, but Ed kept talking.

"You're wearing a uniform! Really, Andrea, how do *you* expect to ... who's that?"

"Good morning to you, too, Ed. I expect people to accept me as an officer of the law. Why aren't you out shaking hands and building roads?" Sam seemed to be asleep. With any luck, he'd remain that way.

"Just came over to pick up my new suit and submit my bid on that stretch of county road out by the Warren place. I'll get it. Nobody else has the equipment and manpower."

"I'm sure you will, Ed. You've brought your dad's company a long way." Sam stirred slightly. She could tell that he wasn't asleep. *Please, Lord*, she said to herself, *just let him keep on playing possum*. She could predict what would happen if Ed said something rude to Sam. Fireworks!

She glanced up at Ed. He was successful, and he looked the part, dressing the way he thought the world expected a future politician to dress—a crisply ironed shirt and designer jeans. Though she couldn't see them, Andrea was willing to bet that he was also sporting the handmade snake-skin boots of which he was so proud. Ed's expensive boots made her think of Sam's worn ones. Sam Farley's boots had been where boots were meant to go.

Ed was still talking, and she had no idea what he'd said. She just wanted to get away from more questions.

"I'm sorry, Ed," she interrupted, "I've got to get back. Buck's at the station alone, with

his leg in a cast.”

“I said who is that guy? Surely Buck isn’t allowing you to transport prisoners!”

“No, he isn’t a prisoner, and he won’t be as long as he remains *silent*.”

Ed leaned down, a serious expression on his face. “About that stranger out at the old Hines place,” he said authoritatively. “You stay away from him.”

Andrea’s eyes narrowed. “Wait just a minute, Ed. Don’t give me orders. I’ve got a job to do.”

“Surely you don’t take all this police business seriously, Andrea. I don’t want you to get hurt by trying to deal with some low-life hitchhiker.”

She covered the growl coming from beneath the Stetson by clearing her throat.

“Ed! You don’t even know him. He’s Mamie Hines’s grandson. He’ll be leaving in a few days. I’ve got to go.”

Andrea put the car in reverse and backed it out of its parking space, bringing Sam’s side window next to Ed.

“We’ll talk about this tonight, Andy,” Ed called.

At that moment Sam raised up, sliding his hat to the back of his head. “I wouldn’t count on it, Governor. She’s already got a date with me.”

“Andrea!” Ed shouted. “Who the hell is this guy?”

“None of your business, Ed.” Andrea sped down the street, leaving him open-mouthed on the sidewalk.

Sam laughed softly. “If that’s the man in your life, Chief Fleming, you’re in big trouble.”

“How dare you tell Ed that we have a date tonight!” Andrea shook her head from side to side, furious with Sam and alarmed at what she’d just said to Ed. “There’s no man in my life. But there’s nothing wrong with Ed Pinyon. He’s simply an old friend.”

“I don’t believe that’s what the tycoon thinks.”

“It doesn’t matter what you believe. I have one more little duty to perform, Sam Farley, and you’d better not open your mouth if you treasure your freedom.”

When Andrea stopped at the state-patrol headquarters, Sam apparently decided that discretion was the better part of valor. He covered his face with his cap and slid back down in the seat while she went inside and requested a confidential police report on her passenger from Lewis Hayslip, the sergeant on duty.

“Last address?” Lewis asked.

Andrea took a wild guess and said, “Texas.” According to the will she’d picked up, the property had been left to Millie Lynn Hines, only child of Mamie and Jed Hines. There was no mention of Sam Farley.

By the time she got back to the car, two of the secretaries were standing at the window talking to Sam. Wonderful! With more than a little abruptness, Andrea nodded at the women, slid into the police car, and squealed the wheels as she backed up and drove rapidly out of town.

Sam bit back a smile, but he didn’t open his mouth. Being in demand by the women in Meredith County was something he could deal with. Getting the statuesque chief of police to be the one to demand him was becoming an interesting challenge. Jail might

even be worth it.

Back at Mamie's place, Andrea stopped the car and let the motor run as he slowly got out.

"Would you care to come in for a refreshing drink of that cold well water you mentioned earlier?"

"Nope. Got to get back to town." Andrea made a quick decision and hoped it was a good one. "Sam," she added with concern in her voice, "I'm sorry about the taxes. I wish there was something I could do."

"There is, Chief. You could take me to lunch."

"Not today, Sam. You could always go down and eat with Louise. Her biscuits are wonderful."

"But darlin', Louise Roberts just doesn't fill out a police uniform like you do."

Andrea left him whistling a show tune as he started up the drive.

Halfway back to town she realized that she was humming the same song.

"What took you so long?" Buck asked. "It's lunchtime."

"I ran into Ed, who isn't too happy about my taking over your job. He doesn't think it's *proper*."

"You're sure it's Ed that's got you acting uppity, and not Sam Farley?"

"I'm sure," she replied firmly.

"And?" Buck's expression was far too innocent. "How is the stranger in our midst this morning?"

"Fine enough to tell Ed Pinyon that I have a date with him tonight, instead of Ed."

Buck's cast came down with a crash. "What?"

"I picked Sam up on the highway, hitchhiking over to the courthouse to talk to the tax commissioner."

"You don't mean he's considering making a claim?"

"I don't know, Buck. All I can tell you is that he seems to be trying to settle in. And I don't know what I think about that. Here's the copy of Mamie's will."

Andrea handed Buck the copy of the will and walked through the connecting door to the city-hall office to escape his questions. She was still angry with Buck for assuming that she belonged with Ed.

Two water-payment envelopes had been slipped through the pay slot in the outside door. Andrea turned her ledger to the proper page and posted the payments.

"The boy's got a claim all right," Buck called from the other room. "An out-of-date driver's license and a birth certificate. Seems to be in order. Lists his father as a Granger Farley, place of birth unknown. That name sounds familiar."

Andrea turned out the light and walked back into Buck's office. "I don't think we have to worry about Sam's father. Sam was named for Farley Granger, a handsome movie star in the old fifties movies. Millie was a fan. Sam doesn't know who his father was."

"Pretty personal conversation you must have had. Do you think Sam'll pay the taxes?"

"No. I don't think so." Andrea sat down on a bench by the door, fanning herself

listlessly as she watched a small black dog lick a half-eaten ice-cream cone on the sidewalk.

“What makes you so sure, Andy?”

“He walks into town, carrying his belongings on his back. Says he’s a carpenter who likes to roam the country, picking up the jobs that pay the most. Everything about the man is temporary.” Andrea found herself remembering his eyes, those dark eyes that teased and seemed to make a joke out of everything, then covered his emotions with a frown.

She sprang restlessly to her feet and pushed the screen door open. “Think I’ll walk down to the post office and get the mail,” she called over her shoulder. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Don’t be long,” Buck agreed vaguely. “I’m meeting Otis at the café.”

Andrea felt Buck watching her as she crossed the street, nodding to Brad Dixon. If he was reading the widow Tolbert’s meter, it had been moved into the barber shop.

Andrea picked up the mail and started back down the sidewalk, coming to a stop when she spotted Buck already in the truck with Otis Parker.

“Eh, Andy,” Buck called out guiltily, “I’m going with Otis to check on his brakes before we eat.”

“Good idea,” Andrea agreed seriously. “I’d rather eat Louise’s fried chicken and biscuits too. Need a ride back?”

“Nah. Don’t worry ’bout that, Andy,” Otis said, pumping the truck’s brakes vigorously, “I’m going to run on over to Cottonboro and pick up a kit to rebuild these consarned brakes. I’ll pick Buck up—no trouble.”

She laughed. “Uh huh. I’m glad they didn’t put you in traction, Pop, or Otis would have to push you down the highway in a hospital bed.”

It was past one o’clock when she heard the screen door open. If one more person happened by the police station to ask about the “wild-looking” stranger, she’d put her bullets back in her gun. Andrea sighed and turned around.

“Hello, darlin’. I’m going to give the future governor a break. I’m going to take you to lunch instead.”

Andrea groaned. Sam Farley, *again*. He was leaning lazily on the counter that separated the reception area from the office and cells. She wasn’t prepared for this. She hadn’t expected him.

“What are you doing here?” Andrea asked.

“I came to apologize,” he said softly. “The last thing I want right now is trouble with the law in your town.”

Andrea took a deep breath and felt all her resistance melt away. They were three feet apart, gazing at each other wistfully. She didn’t know about him being in trouble with the law, but with those dark eyes scorching her with hot intensity, *the law* was in big trouble of her own.

Andrea was glad the counter was between them. They were in the middle of the

Arcadia Police Department, it was high noon, and she was being faced down by her own private outlaw.

"I'm on duty, Sam," she said quietly.

"And police officers on duty don't eat lunch? Look, we don't have to go in the patrol car. Let's just walk to the café down the street."

"I appreciate your apology, but I don't need this constant upheaval in my life. It used to be calm and serene before you came to town. Why are you doing this?"

He looked confused. "The truth is, I thought taking you to lunch would be fun."

"Fun? I think you like your life to be chaotic. You need the challenge of the game, don't you. Why?"

Why indeed? Sam asked himself, not at all sure. He'd walked into town under a broiling sun, in the middle of lush, green, humid country where hardly a breath of air stirred, all to see this woman. He truly didn't know why he'd come. All he knew was that his pulse was racing, and it wasn't from the heat.

When he'd seen her in her pristine uniform earlier that morning, he'd understood why women always fell for cops. He was the civilian, and all he wanted to do was bend down and kiss the chief of police. There was something so right about her, this woman staring stormily at him with summer eyes flecked with gold.

Lanky and lush, she was the most sensual woman he'd ever met. It didn't even matter that she looked ready to strangle him. She was firm in her resistance and her duty, and he couldn't figure out what kept him from giving up.

Andrea recaptured her composure. "Get in the police car, Mr. Farley, and I'll take you home—again." She strode past him and waited in the doorway. "I'm not going to have lunch with you because that would give an official status to our relationship."

"You mean a man and woman can't just have lunch without making a statement of intent. Come on, Chief, this is the nineties."

"This woman can't, Sam." Andrea clenched her fists in quiet frustration.

"Hmm." He grinned. "What will the good citizens of Arcadia, not to mention your father, think when they see you and me drive off in the patrol car?"

"You're learning," she said with a grimace. "By this time tonight, the story will be that I spend more time with you than I do on my job."

"Well, I would be a lot more fun." He stepped so close to her that she could feel his breath caressing her face.

"Fun? Stop it, Sam. What are you trying to do to me, ruin my reputation?"

"Aw, Chief." He grinned wickedly and whispered, "Don't you ever want to shake this town up by doing something completely outrageous? Let go, Stormy. Run wild with me."

Andrea had always heard the expression "dancing eyes," but until now, she'd never seen them. Until now she'd managed to avoid looking at Sam. In the sunlight she saw that his eyes weren't black—they were the rich brown color of boiling cane syrup, just as it was ready to be poured into the jar. The disquieting thing was, they were just as hot.

"Get in the car, Farley," she snapped. "I live here. Reputations are important in

Arcadia. You seem determined to ruin mine.”

“Sorry. I don’t want to cause you any more trouble than I already have.” He let himself be pushed away, then strolled to the car. “In the future I’ll be more subtle.”

“You, subtle? I’d like to see that.”

“You’re going to. Want me to get behind the iron screen so you’ll look official?”

“Gracious no. By the time I got to the city limits, Agnes would be inundated by people wanting to know who my prisoner was. Just get in, Sam.”

Sam complied, watching Andrea settle into the driver’s seat. All of this game playing was new to him. Why couldn’t his grandmother have lived in Chicago? The only reaction they would have gotten from the neighbors there would have been relief that he was in the police car instead of one of them.

He wasn’t sure what he’d been thinking about, walking into town to apologize to a woman he barely knew for having done something to displease her. Something he was dead sure that she secretly welcomed. He’d never cared before.

When he was with Andrea, there was a warmth that made him more aware of the lonely life he’d lived. Andrea, in some bizarre way, was mixed up with all these conflicting thoughts of home and family, and that was making him crazy.

“Look, Chief Fleming, I am sincerely sorry if I offended you last night and again this morning. But I’m not sorry that I kissed you.” He paused. “And I’m pretty sure that I’m going to do it again. So if you want to protect your reputation, we’d better get going.”

Andrea stared at him desperately for a moment, then started the engine and drove away, feeling the censuring gaze of the old men sitting on the bench in front of the drugstore boring like nails into the back of her head.

She drove too fast, wondering why this man seemed destined to ruin what had been a simple plan for her to assume her father’s duties. After one night in town, Sam Farley had managed to unsettle her to the extent that she was halfway to her own house before she realized that she’d turned the wrong way.

“Now look what you’ve made me do,” she complained.

“I think you’ll have to be a bit more specific. What exactly have I made you do? I haven’t said a word, and I haven’t touched you.”

“Mamie’s house is in the opposite direction.”

“Well,” he said with a smile, “I’m open to suggestions. What about a picnic under Lover’s Oak?” He didn’t know why he kept teasing her, making his interest in her so obvious. He was chasing her, a law officer, the picture of southern womanhood, complete with a town full of eyes watching every move he made.

Andrea frowned. “I don’t know how to play clever little games like you do, and I don’t want to learn. You said you wanted lunch. All right, Farley, I’ll feed you.”

“More chocolate-chip cookies?”

“No, I had something like arsenic in mind.”

“Good thinking, darlin’. Arsenic works slowly. We’ll have time to make my death a memorable demise. You could put it in the cookies.”

“No more cookies. Louise makes those cookies for Buck. They’re ... friends.”

“I see—cookies and friendship. Is that considered an acceptable statement of intent?”

“No, I don’t think their friendship is public, yet. I didn’t know until he broke his leg and couldn’t drive.”

“So it is possible to be discreet in Arcadia, if a person really wants to.”

“Yes, I suppose,” she answered thoughtfully. She could have told him that she knew it was possible. She’d been so discreet once that not even Buck had known that she’d fallen in love with a man, another outsider like Sam.

By this time Andrea was approaching her house. In an absurd kind of way, Sam was right, about a lot of things. More and more often lately there were times when she wanted to shake the town up, to do something totally wild. Rebellion didn’t come easy, and it demanded too high a price. She pulled into her driveway and parked the patrol car beneath the pecan tree by the porch.

“As for those cookies,” Sam went on innocently, as though he had no idea of the crisis she’d just passed through, “you won’t believe this, Chief Fleming, but I’ve heard about Arcadia’s cookies since I was a boy. It may have taken a lot of years for me to get a chance to taste them, but it was worth the wait.”

Andrea knew he said ‘cookies,’ but from the dreamy tone of his voice, she knew that wasn’t what he meant. The cookies seem to be some kind of symbol to Sam. She just didn’t know yet what they stood for.

Sam was looking through the window with a faraway expression in his eyes, taking in her white clapboard house, the yard, the screened front porch. “You have a swing,” he murmured. “And a honeysuckle vine shading it, making it private. I should have known.” When he got out of the patrol car and started up on the porch, Andrea had no choice but to follow.

Andrea wished she could stifle the ever-present trembling of her nerve endings. Everything about Sam Farley kept her slightly off-key, and now his actions completely mystified her. He went onto the porch and sat down in her swing, then rocked forward and back almost reverently. She stopped beside it and looked down at him. He kept on swinging and smiling.

“You all right, cowboy?”

“I’m fine, Chief. Just thinking.” Except that he couldn’t organize his thoughts. Everywhere he turned he saw Andrea’s past, all safe and secure. He’d never understood his mother’s need to belong before. One place had always been as good as another to him.

Shaking off his preoccupation, Sam forced a smile. “So this is where you live.”

“Yes. You’d better come inside, where it’s cooler. The sun’s straight overhead now, and you’ll get overheated.”

“I’m used to the outdoor heat. I’m a carpenter, remember? Some of the places I’ve worked got to a hundred degrees in the shade. But I’d rather be inside with you. I like the indoor kind of heat too.” His eyes sparkled as he rose lazily and followed her inside.

Andrea looked at him blankly for a moment. He was doing it again, wrapping her in some kind of visual electric blanket fueled by the current in his eyes. She turned around, walked inside, and picked up the phone. “Agnes, ring the station for me.”

“I thought you were at the station, Andy,” Agnes said in surprise.

"No, I ... came home for lunch."

There was a click and a ring, and ... "Police station. Buck here."

"Buck. Thought I'd better let you know where I am."

"Good idea, since I was told by at least two people that you left with Sam Farley." His displeasure changed into concern. "You okay?"

"Sure. I'm at the house if you need me."

"Now, just a minute ..."

"Bye, Buck. I won't be long." Andrea hung up quickly.

Sam was wandering, curious, around the living room. "You leave your windows wide open," he remarked. "Incredible."

He liked Andrea Fleming's house. It was warm and happy. The furnishings were an odd assortment of comfortably mismatched pieces. The inside walls were tongue-and-groove pine, stained a soft, creamy white. The hardwood floors were polished and covered with an assortment of braided rugs of soft greens and pinks and browns. The fireplace was large with a marble inset and a carved-wood mantelpiece, holding a tall windup clock with a sun and a moon on its face.

In one corner was an upright piano with an arrangement of family pictures on top. He wandered over and examined them. There was one of Andrea at about eight, with a bicycle and a skinned elbow. A high school photograph showed her wearing a basketball uniform, holding a trophy. She was a woman even then, with breasts that strained against the front of her jersey, and firm long legs.

"Do you live alone?" he asked curiously as he caught sight of a man's hat on the back of the kitchen door.

"Of course not. I thought you knew. I live with Buck."

He arched one brow at her in surprise. "You still live at home, with Daddy?"

"Of course, where else would I live?" Andrea's answer was one of curiosity, not defense.

"I see. Well, that must be an awful strain on the governor, having to pass muster every time he sees you. Why do you call him Buck?"

He was making her feel uncomfortable about living at home, something that had always been normal to her. What did he think she wanted to do that she couldn't? She closed off that train of thought. What she wanted to do was something she wouldn't even allow herself to think about.

"Everybody in Arcadia calls my father Buck, and I grew up doing the same thing."

She turned and walked down the hallway and into the kitchen, switching on the small window air conditioner. She wasn't leaving Sam. She was walking away from ... any need for discretion.

Sam followed.

"I guess I ticked him off this morning with my answers to his questions," Sam commented. "But I didn't know he was your dad. And I'm not exactly comfortable with a man carrying a gun. I'm sorry." He pulled up a stool and sat down at the counter, watching Andrea work.

"He'll survive."

"I know. It's me I'm worried about."

From the refrigerator Andrea took a head of lettuce and tore it into small pieces, filling two small wooden bowls. She added a scoop of chicken salad to the lettuce and placed a fan of wheat crackers around the small plate beneath the bowl. Then she went back to the refrigerator for an ice tray and a quart jar of tea. She filled the glasses with ice and tea. A ceiling fan circulated the cooling air, but a sheen of perspiration glistened on her forehead.

Sam's statement that it was he that he was worried about still hung in the silence. "You?" she finally said. "I can't imagine anything worrying you. You're a man who lives his life on the edge. I couldn't do that—without falling over."

"You think that I don't? Well, you're wrong. I've done that, and I climbed back out again and moved on. It's the challenge that keeps life interesting, darlin' "

"Maybe, but I couldn't take the constant battle. I don't put disaster behind me that easily."

"Maybe I don't either anymore."

"Maybe we both need to change our image," Andrea said unsteadily. "I hope you don't mind having a salad for lunch," she said, carrying the dishes to a shaded porch off the kitchen. "It's too hot for anything heavy."

"Uh, no. A salad is fine." She was right about the heat, but Sam didn't think either a salad or the air conditioner would cool off either of them. He followed her and sat down at a small table covered with a checked cloth. "Tell me about yourself, Chief. How'd you get to be the head honcho?"

"Buck broke his leg in a wreck, chasing a speeder. I was appointed to the job as an economy measure. I'm already on the payroll."

"How come the police car wasn't wrecked?"

"Buck was driving our Bronco—on his day off."

"And you," Sam finally asked. "What do you do when you aren't being a police officer?"

"Nothing exciting, I'm afraid. I run city hall, collect water bills, pay bills, whatever needs doing. I'm just a simple country girl."

"I doubt there's anything simple about you, Chief."

They ate quietly for a time. Only the movement of a determined bumble bee buzzing around the flower beds beyond the porch broke the stillness.

"What about you, Sam? How'd you get to be a carpenter?"

"I learned woodworking in school. That's what they do to the tough guys, put them in shop classes. Funny thing, I found out I liked it. On a construction site it isn't who you are that counts, it's how good you do the job."

He reached out and brushed a cracker crumb from her upper lip. His unexpected touch was electric, and Andrea knew he heard her gasp.

"In Arcadia," she admitted, "it's who you are *and* what you do. We may not always approve, but if you're one of ours, we care."

"I don't think my mother believed that."

Andrea didn't know how to answer him. "I'm sorry, Sam. I don't know what happened

there. None of us understand.”

“I do. She had me, and they threw her out. She spent the rest of her life wishing for this place. I never understood why it was so important to her.”

“I think,” Andrea said slowly, “that it’s because our roots nourish us, become an anchor when the storms come. Maybe your mother needed that.”

“An anchor in the storm. I’ll have to remember that. I’ve never been around people who accepted your weaknesses. In fact—” he hesitated for a long moment, “I’m not sure I believe they exist.”

“Believe it, Sam. People in Arcadia care about each other in a way that outsiders don’t understand.”

“ ‘Outsiders’? My mother was an insider, and she didn’t belong either.”

Andrea began to stack the dishes. David had been an outsider too. She didn't know why he kept coming to mind. He was part of her past, a part that was finished long ago.

"I have to get back to work," she said with a sigh.

"Ah, shucks," Sam teased, sorry that he'd said something to draw her back to the present. "Must we? Couldn't you take the afternoon off? We could go fishing?"

"Afternoon off? Absolutely not!" Andrea protested as she went back into the kitchen. "Sam, you have to understand that you just can't come in here and expect me to ..."

"To what?" He ambled after her, closing the distance between them. "Why do you move away from me whenever I start to get close?"

"I ..." She could almost *hear* the sound of her heart thudding against the wall of her chest. She couldn't think when he was so close. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't even bring up a picture of the past she'd sworn to learn from. "I don't know how to deal with somebody like you, Sam. You're a stranger here. And I don't know how to ... to be discreet."

"You're right. That's me, a stranger everywhere. Maybe Arcadia and this"—he looked around the tiny kitchen—"is the closest thing to a real home I'll ever know."

"I'm sorry, Sam. I think you're confusing your dream of Arcadia with affection for me. Just let me be your friend."

"'Friend'? Secret lovers I've had, but secret friends who can't even have lunch together? That's something new. How do friends act when one of them wants to kiss the other?" He watched her take a quick breath and lick her lip nervously.

"They don't. It's friends or nothing, Sam. I think I'll just leave these dishes until later. Buck will be climbing the wall if I don't get back."

"Okay." Sam let out a long breath. Buck wasn't the only one climbing the wall. "What do *just* friends do around here that's legal?" He picked up his tea glass and rinsed it in the sink.

"Well, they go to church socials, or to the lake, or roller-skating." Andrea wiped the kitchen counter and switched off the air conditioner and the overhead fan. She led the way back to the patrol car, pausing only to pull the screen door closed.

"Oh, Stormy, can't you just see me at a church social? Gabriel would blow his horn, and the walls would fall down."

Andrea stopped by the car and looked at Sam's bitter expression. "Gabriel might blow his horn, Sam, but our walls are strong."

"Yeah, I've had firsthand experiences with small-town walls. They hold you too close sometimes."

"Only if you want them, Sam. There are some people who don't. I do."

Sam saw the certainty in Andrea's face. He couldn't seem to find the proper quip. His thoughts were more ambiguous. There was a long minute when everything seemed to stand still. At last he opened the car door for Andrea and bowed gallantly as she slid behind the steering wheel.

"Lordy, Chief," Sam said with a tense frown as he got inside the car and slammed the door, "how in the world do you stand these gnats swarming in front of your face all the time?" He fanned the cluster of black insects away.

"I'm so used to them that I guess I don't even notice. They're as much a part of Arcadia as the cotton dust." She started the car and drove away.

Sam didn't seem to hear her answer. "I've been thinking," he finally ventured, "that it would be a waste to lose my mother's house to a tax auction. After all, I *am* a carpenter. I could repair the house, include the back taxes as part of the deal, and sell it, make a little profit."

"Why would anybody want to pay full price when they could just pay the taxes and get it all?"

"So, it's a bad idea, not the first one I've had. It's just that this is the first house I've ever *almost* owned."

Andrea glanced at him, watching his eyes take in the countryside they passed. It was as if he were somehow drawing in what he was seeing, like a plant reaching for the sun, soaking up the serene essence of Arcadia. She understood that serenity, and she felt it now in Sam.

Sam saw her smile and felt his heart warm. He'd only stopped off to see the place his mother had been so attached to, not to spend what little money he had fixing up the old house that somebody else would probably tear down.

But there was nothing wrong with spending a week or two getting to know the chief a little better. She needed a little loosening up, and he needed to understand about belonging. He might even take in the Founder's Day Picnic. Was it really chance that had brought him to Arcadia, or had he been searching for it all along?

On her way back to the station Andrea dropped Sam at the local supermarket and gave the clerk instructions to deliver Sam back home along with his groceries. Buck didn't ask where she'd been, and she didn't tell him. She didn't go to the Friday-night movie. And on Sunday, for the first time in years, she pleaded ill and stayed home from church. She hadn't seen or heard from Sam in four days.

On Tuesday afternoon Buck hitched an early ride home with Otis, leaving Andrea at loose ends and as jumpy as a cat with a bad case of fleas.

A call came in from Lewis over at the county state patrol office. There'd been no news yet on her private inquiry, but there'd been another theft. A backhoe had been stolen from a construction site above Midway. He wanted to alert Buck to be on the lookout. "Seems like these thieves are getting brave," Lewis said. "That's the third piece of heavy equipment we've had reported stolen in the last month. They're insured, but those machines cost a pretty penny."

Andrea took the report and said they'd watch for the stolen equipment. The phone rang again.

"City hall."

"Hello, darlin'. Miss Louise was kind enough to allow me to use her phone. Have you missed me?"

The air rushed from her lungs, and she sat down with a thud. In her mind she could see the smile on his lips, and her throat burned with tension.

"Are you there, Chief?"

"Of course, Mr. Farley. What can I do for you?"

Logically Andrea knew that was a loaded question. But then everything she said to this man seem to have a double meaning.

"Mr. Farley? My, how formed we are this afternoon. I like 'Sam' better. Sam wants you to drop by his place and ravish his body. But I suppose that's out."

"You suppose right, cowboy."

"In that case I will settle for the chief returning my papers. I could come in to town and pick them up, but I thought you might not want me to do that."

"You're leaving town?" There was a barely audible click on the line, and Andrea knew that they had an audience. Either someone was using Louise's party line, or Agnes was listening in.

"I'm trying to decide. I have to make a living, and I doubt that there's much demand for a carpenter around here. Your walls don't seem to need much repair," Sam said, losing the teasing drawl. He'd heard the click too.

"All right. I'll have Buck and Otis drop them by," she managed in as neutral a voice as she could muster, considering that her heart was tap-dancing in her chest.

"Fine, ma'am, I'd appreciate that."

Andrea replaced the receiver and swung her chair around. Buck should be at home. She tried to call him. There was no answer. Where was he when she needed him?

Slumping back into the chair, Andrea felt every ounce of resolve drain out of her. Who was she kidding? She'd been a walking zombie for the last four days. Sure, she'd helped get a stray cow out of a cornfield and answered a call to settle a dispute over who owned the blackberries growing between two formerly best freinds' property on the other side of town. But she'd been uncharacteristically cross with the troublemakers, threatening to confiscate the berries as evidence until they'd agreed to forget their quarrel and make pies for the Wednesday-night church supper.

Everywhere she'd been, she'd run into someone who'd had a question about Sam Farley. She squinted, trying to ward off the threat of a nagging headache, knowing all the time it wasn't the headache bothering her. It was Sam. He was worse than the summer heat. She hadn't laid eyes on the man for four days, but he was smothering her with his unseen presence.

Maybe if she returned his paperwork, he'd pack his knapsack and hit the road. Maybe then she could get rid of the restlessness that plagued her from the time she got up in the morning until she finally went to sleep at night. She lifted the phone.

"Agnes, I'm going to run home for a while."

“Buck’s not there.”

“I’m sure he is,” Andrea stated. “He’s just on the porch and can’t get to the phone.”

Ten minutes later she discovered that Agnes was right. She decided it was time she faced Sam Farley again anyway. This staying away was worse than seeing the man.

The driveway to Mamie’s house had been cleared. The brush had been cut back, and the grass had been mowed. Andrea drove the police car up the hill and parked it behind the house beneath a large sweet-gum tree at the edge of the freshly mowed yard.

Sam heard her car and met her on the porch. He opened the screen door and stood, just looking at her. He’d hoped she’d come, alibiing his need by telling himself that it was simply her body that was driving him crazy.

This time she’d plaited her rebellious mass of black hair into a long braid that fell across her shoulder and ended at the swell of her breast. Her lips were a soft pink, her cheeks flushed in the sunlight. She wasn’t wearing any makeup. With her dark lashes and crystal-blue eyes, she didn’t need it.

“Hello, Andrea.”

“Andrea.” This was the first time he’d called her that. It changed their relationship. Everything was different somehow. “So, you do know my name.”

Sam stepped back into the kitchen doorway and folded his arms across his chest. “I know.”

“The place looks nice,” she said, feeling as if she were standing on the moving floor of the fun house at the county fair. What was there about the man that affected her equilibrium? He was wearing jeans, as usual, this pair with a raveled hole in the knee, and a black polo shirt. He was barefoot. And his feet were long and—ugly. Thank goodness, there was something about the man that she could focus on without feeling her pulse throb in response.

“Thanks. I’ve been ... working on it, here and there.”

“Why go to all that trouble? Bad idea, remember?”

“Because—” he hesitated, then went on, “it feels good. Louise is even teaching me to cook. It was either that or starve,” he added abruptly. “I don’t expect you to understand. I’m not sure that I do, but for as long as I’m here, this place is mine.”

“I do understand.” And she did. Already the house was taking on a lived-in quality that was warm and inviting. She could tell he was pleased with her answer.

He nodded and held out his hand. “You’ve seen the *here*. I want you to see the *there*.”

She looked down at his hand and back at his face questioning. Suddenly the remaining tension dissolved, and she watched the frown on his face turn into a tentative smile. Andrea couldn’t help smiling in return. He wasn’t David, and she wasn’t her mother. For as long as he was around, she’d be his friend. Andrea placed her hand in his, and he drew her into the dark coolness inside.

“I’m not sure this is a smart move,” she said breathlessly.

“If it isn’t,” he said in a voice just as winded, “I’ll teach you some. Smart moves are my specialty.”

She followed him through a kitchen that was clean, though it was obvious that he was using it, and down the corridor, stopping just as he reached the parlor door. He looked

down at her, and the silence was filled with the sound of two hearts beating. Even in the darkness she could see the unspoken desire in his eyes. But this time desire was tempered with something more. Maybe it was pride, maybe it was caring. Maybe they were both suffering from that case of raging passion Madge had wished for. She couldn't tell whether it was her heart or his she was hearing.

"*Here and there*," Andrea repeated. "Is this the *there*?" she managed in a ragged voice.

"No. This is this." He dropped a quick hot kiss on her parted lips and stepped away before she could respond. He pulled her through the front door and turned her to the end of the porch with a proud flourish. "This is the there. What do you think?"

She followed his gaze in confusion. The only thing she could see was a paint-weathered swing hanging motionless on the shaded end of the porch. Still dazed by the kiss and what she'd seen in his eyes, Andrea needed a moment to realize that the swing was what she was supposed to see.

"Mamie's swing?"

"Yes. I found it in the barn. Needs some paint and maybe some new chain, but I think it will hold us. Come and sit with me, on my porch, in my swing, Andrea."

"I don't know." She held back, knowing that it wasn't the strength of the swing she was questioning.

"Ah, come on. Don't worry about the neighbors. We're too far from the road."

"They won't know I'm here. I parked behind the house," she answered too quickly.

Sam held back a smile. She'd come to him, not openly yet, but she'd come, and that knowledge made his heart sing. "I'd better tell you, Chief, that's no guarantee that you won't be found out anyway. They seem to come out of the woodwork around here, the neighborly townsfolk."

"Oh? I'm sure they're just being friendly."

"*Curious* is a better word. I've been invited to share a meal, to go to the Founder's Day celebration, to attend the church social—me, the unredeemed sinner. I could be an ax murderer, and they wouldn't know the difference."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"An ax murderer?"

"No. At least not yet. But if you don't come and sit down, I may start hacking."

"All right." She allowed him to lead her to the swing and sat down, hoping that the wood was stronger than it looked. She wasn't too sure about her own strength. There was a loud creak when Sam sat down beside her, but the seat held. For a long minute they just sat as Sam touched his bare foot to the floor, nudging the swing into movement.

"Sam, don't get angry with the people who drop by. As far as they're concerned, you're Mamie's grandson, and that's all that matters. They trust you."

"Yeah, and there's a fool born every minute. Arcadia sure has its quota, including me. I'm beginning to believe them."

Andrea turned toward him. "I know it's next to impossible for you to realize that you're welcome here. But you are, because of Mamie. Don't," she said simply, drawing

her gaze away from the intensity of his expression, “make us regret accepting you.”

They sat, allowing the swing to glide back and forth, creaking shrilly in the silence.

He slid his arm along the top of the swing and rested his fingertips loosely against the back of Andrea’s neck. For four days he’d cleared and cleaned, had avoided the people who just happened to drop by. He hadn’t seen Andrea, but there hadn’t been a minute that she hadn’t been on his mind. Now she was beside him, and he realized that all his work hadn’t been for his grandmother. It hadn’t been for his mother. It had been for her. He took in a breath that filled and expanded his lungs.

“Thank you for coming. I’m sorry if I made a problem for you and the governor,” he said, then wished he hadn’t. He didn’t want anybody on this porch with them. But he couldn’t talk about what he was feeling unless he knew that she cared.

“You didn’t. And ... I wanted to.” Her answer had come easier than she’d expected.

“You know, according to Louise, the talk is that you and I are an ‘item.’ I’ve never been an ‘item’ before.”

Andrea was startled. No, this story was one piece of gossip that hadn’t come her way. “I can’t imagine why. We aren’t.”

“Oh, but we are, darlin’. We’re involved. I just don’t know what that means—yet.”

“Sam Farley you have an overactive imagination. Nothing has happened between us.”

“Nothing?” He liked the way she didn’t look at him. That and the flush on her face said more than if she’d flung herself into his arms.

“One kiss isn’t anything to make a capital offense out of. We’re nothing more than friends, acquaintances,” she amended primly.

“Only friends? I think you’d better speak for yourself, Chief Fleming,” Sam drawled lazily. “Strictly from my point of view, I think that the governor has a reason to be worried. And I’ve kissed you twice so far.”

Andrea fanned a swarm of gnats away from her face, then slid her fingers to the back of her head to replace a strand of hair that had come loose from the braid hanging down her back. Her hand grazed Sam’s knuckles, and she jumped.

“Ed might have been assuming too much,” she explained, “but I could do a lot worse. He’s honest and dependable, and he’s offering me a secure future. In Arcadia that’s considered an admirable trait.”

Sam removed his fingertips from her neck and took her hand in his. “I can’t do much about your future. I don’t even know what mine is, but if it’s honesty you want, then listen to this. I want to make love to you. I think you want the same thing.”

“You want to make love to me?” Andrea was incredulous. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“You’re the one who wanted honesty, darlin’. Tonight, tomorrow, whenever. As friends or something more, I’m going to make love to you, Andrea. We’ve been struck by lightning, and we can’t change that. We might as well accept it for as long as it lasts.”

“‘For as long as it lasts’? No way, José. I’ll never let that happen again.” She started to get to her feet but was caught by Sam’s big hand and pulled back onto the seat beside him.

“You tell me to accept the honesty of the fine citizens of Arcadia, but you can’t accept

a simple truth, one on one. All that acceptance sounds good, doesn't it, so long as it isn't you that has to do the trusting."

"But, Sam, you don't understand."

"Who hurt you so bad, Chief, that you've scurried down this rabbit hole and pulled the town over you?"

"The 'who' doesn't matter," she snapped. "Let's just say that he was a traveling man, like you. Even the farmer's daughter learns sooner or later."

Sam lifted Andrea's hand and turned it palm-up, placing light sweet kisses on the soft skin. "My mother used to do this," he whispered between kisses. "She'd say, 'Let me kiss it and make it well.' Maybe we could do that for each other."

"How could we possibly make each other well, Sam? We're so different. You ..."

"Need somebody to hold me sometimes too. Kiss me, Andrea, darlin'?"

But she was saved from her decision by the clatter of Otis's truck as it turned in and rattled wildly up the drive. It bounced from one rut to the other, took a sudden swerve, and headed straight for the corner of the house where they were sitting.

"Look out!" Sam yelled, coming to his feet. "He's going to hit the house."

Sam leapt from the porch, dragging Andrea with him as Otis hit the corner with a crash. The truck sliced away the brick supports, bringing down part of the roof. It fell across the truck and buried it in debris. When the truck finally stopped, it was nose-to-nose with the bed Sam had been sleeping in.

Sam picked himself up from the ground where he'd dived and looked around. Andrea was surveying the damage in amazement. Mamie's house had withstood fire, lightning, and at least three generations of occupants. Yet in one swift move Otis had demolished the entire bedroom end of the building. The hurt Sam felt was so deep that it was almost a physical pain. His grandmother's house—his mother's dream—his home, wounded.

In the midst of the silence they heard a matter-of-fact monotone voice repeating over and over, "Sam, Sam, Sam, I think we're stuck in here."

" 'We'?" Sam and Andrea sprang into action, pulling away the rubble, wrestling broken lumber and plaster away until they reached the truck. Inside, apparently unharmed, was Otis Parker, staring straight ahead as though he were watching a movie at the drive-in.

"You idiot!" Buck growled from the passenger seat.

"Are you two all right?" Andrea asked, trying to get a good look at her father.

"Believe so." Otis looked around in stoic surprise. "Made a little mess here, didn't we?"

Sam forced open the door and pulled Otis out, helping him over to a flooring beam where he sat down. "What happened?"

Andrea watched her father wince as he slid across the seat, extending the cast before him.

"Well, I had to pour on the coals to get her up that hill, and she just got to moving too fast to stop her. Is Buck all right?"

"I'm all right, you idiot. It's Sam's house you'd better worry about. Why the hell didn't you stop?"

“Oh, I tried. No brakes.”

“I thought you got brake parts last week,” Andrea said. She wasn’t at all sure that Buck was all right. He hadn’t yet tried to stand.

“Did,” Otis agreed. “There they are, right there in the back. Been meaning to get around to putting ’em on. You aren’t going to have me arrested, are you, Sam?”

It took the better part of an hour to get Otis’s truck backed out of the house and survey the damage, damage that would take most of Sam’s money to repair. So much for the taxes. That had been a wild dream anyway. Now that too was gone. Finally Andrea was able to convince Buck to let Sam help get him home.

He’d argued all the way, but Andrea noticed that he allowed Sam to help him to his bedroom easily enough. She didn’t follow them, leaving Buck to Sam’s ministrations while she changed into a pair of crisp white shorts and a faded T-shirt.

Later, as Sam closed Buck’s bedroom door and wandered out on the porch where Andrea was sitting, she voiced her concern. “Is he really all right?”

“I think so. He’s just a bit shaken.”

Sam sat down on the steps beside her and glanced across her yard to the cornfield beyond the fence. Not a leaf moved. The sticky late-afternoon heat lay over the house and yard like a plastic umbrella, closing out the air. He tried not to see Andrea’s long tan legs, legs that brought the unbidden picture of another kind of heat to mind.

At the edge of the porch a wide strip of yellow-orange flowers spilled over the straw-covered flower beds. He recognized those flowers. He and his mother had lived in an apartment once where the previous tenants had left a window box of the perky little blossoms. His mother had laughingly called them Merry Golds. He whispered the name out loud without knowing he’d spoken.

“Yes,” Andrea said, “my mother grew them when she and Buck were first married. We’ve been planting them there ever since. I always like to think that a part of her is still here.”

“What happened to her?”

“She left. When I was two years old, she packed her bags and left.”

“I don’t understand. My mother never left me, not even when things were bad. Though I don’t know if being dragged through every rinky-dink oil town in the West is saying much.” Sam stood up and walked into the yard.

Andrea rose, gave a look back at the house, and followed him. “You and your mother, and Buck and me. Funny, isn’t it, how things work out.”

They crossed the yard and walked up the hill and down into the apple orchard, leaving the house behind them. Worry over Buck being in another accident, the talk about her mother, and memories of David had set off a chain reaction of regret. Andrea was near tears. She felt them welling up in her eyes, and she was glad that it was almost dusk.

There was a breeze, now that the sun had dropped over the top of the pine thicket, and the shade beneath the huge old tree limbs was quiet and cool. Tiny green balls of fruit dotted the limbs. A chorus of tree frogs and katydids filled the silence.

“Andrea?”

Sam had come up behind her. She could feel his presence as though an invisible thread had been spun between them. He touched her shoulder.

"I'm sorry that my good memories spark bad moments for you."

"Not your fault, Sam. I have insecurities of my own. I just don't usually let anyone know."

He turned her around and lifted her chin with his rough fingertips. "Andrea, you've still got Buck. I don't have anybody. Now my house is hurt too."

"I know, Sam. I'm sorry."

"Andrea, love, please, I need you to hold me. Let me hold you. Let us comfort each other," he said softly.

"Yes." She moved into his arms and pressed herself against him. For a long time he just held her, caressing her back and her arm. He didn't kiss her. He nuzzled her cheek and murmured low comforting words that made holding each other seem right. He needed to be held. She understood that need. With that sudden truth, she accepted the knowledge that she wanted this man, his tenderness and his strength.

"It feels right," he said in a low tight voice, "being close. But I don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't," she whispered as her legs turned to water, and she allowed him to draw her down to the ground. Sam's arms moved from her back to her shoulders. He was on his knees, facing her. She felt it again, that invisible blanket of sensation that wrapped around her whenever he touched her. Except now the blanket was surrounding him too.

His hand left her shoulder and played lightly down her neck. He skimmed the tops of her breasts through the soft cotton of her shirt, never relinquishing the intensity of his gaze.

Then his hand was underneath, lifting the shirt, touching her bare skin. His gaze followed the path of his fingertips. Her heavy breasts were encased by sheer lace that accentuated the full peak of her nipples.

Sam didn't talk anymore, and neither did Andrea. She knew that all along she'd been fighting the attraction she felt. She'd convinced herself that Sam's coming to town had only rekindled the memories she'd suppressed, memories of loving David and the pain of losing him.

But it wasn't David who filled her mind. Nor was it the sudden loneliness. She was being forced to examine the everlasting sameness of her life, not as security, but as an escape. Sam stayed on the move, and she remained in one place. But their motives were the same. They both wanted to be safe.

The rough texture of his fingers touching her breast through the lace sent shivers of desire through her, and she trembled. With each stroke of his fingertips the trembling intensified. Sam lifted his gaze, and she saw the plea in his eyes as he caught her chin with his other hand. Then with a groan of anguish, he kissed her. She couldn't hold back a whimper as she swayed against him, following his body willingly to the warm, thick grass beneath the trees. And the kiss she returned was wrought with a need that closed out the orchard and everything else in her world.

Rolling over, he pulled her on top of him and locked her against him. His tongue was

more demanding than his hands, and he plundered and examined every part of her mouth. At last, tearing his lips away, he lifted her, shifting her upward so that he could reach her breasts. Arching her back, she offered her body to him so that he could work from one aching nipple to the other. She wanted to feel his mouth on her—here—now, not in her bed as she'd imagined during the hot sleepless hours she'd paced her bedroom floor.

"Andy? Are you out there?" Ed Pinyon called out from the yard below.

"Hell!" Sam stiffened and rolled over, thrusting Andrea away as he sprang to his feet and rushed forward to meet whoever was moving up the hill in their direction. Andrea caught her breath and lay in unsated misery for a moment before she realized what he'd done. Certainly he was as aroused as she, yet he'd gone forward to intercept their intruder, giving her precious moments to put herself back together.

She sat up, lifting her breasts to hook the bra that had come unfastened sometime along the way. Damn Ed Pinyon for coming after her. "Damn and thank you," she whispered shakily. She knew that she was being every kind of a fool, but she wished for one true, wild moment that her rescuer had been too late.

Deliberately she rubbed her eyes. Anybody would be able to tell that there was something wrong. She hoped only that she could convince her audience that she'd been crying.

"Andrea, I came as soon as I heard." Ed covered the distance between them in a few steps and took her hand. "Are you all right?"

"I think so, Ed. Thank you."

Ed put a possessive arm around her, ignoring Sam's presence. "You should have called me. What's *he* doing here?"

"He helped me get Buck home, Ed."

"I knew this man was trouble. I don't want you to have anything else to do with him, Andrea."

"Now just a minute, Ed, this wasn't Sam's fault. It was Otis who crashed through Sam's house." Andrea tried unsuccessfully to move out of Ed's embrace.

"Of course it is. He doesn't belong here. He's either a criminal or a con artist. I was content to let you have your little fling, until this happened. Now I want it stopped. It's becoming an embarrassment."

"Let me go, Ed." Andrea was shocked. She had no idea that Ed was still nursing the mistaken idea that he had any control over her actions.

"Let her go, Pinyon," Sam said quietly. "Now."

There was a long moment when Andrea wasn't sure that Ed would comply. She felt the silent anger in his grip and saw the deadly fury in his eyes. Nobody ever crossed Ed. Nobody ever had a reason to, until now. And she knew that being forced to back down wasn't something Ed would forgive.

Ed dropped his arm. He shot a wicked look back at Sam. "All right. Perhaps I am overreacting. I suppose I should thank you for bringing Andrea and Buck home, Farley," Ed said, but his tone didn't match his words.

Andrea stepped back and moved past Ed down the hill. "Too bad about the damage to

Mamie's house," he went on, falling in behind, "but it doesn't matter. I'm going to tear it down anyway."

Sam stopped. "Tear it down?"

Andrea heard the shock in his voice and realized what she'd done by not telling him the truth. She should have warned him, prepared him.

"Sure. Didn't Andrea tell you? I'm going to claim Mamie's house at the tax auction. Who else would want it?"

Sam walked past Ed to a point where he could face Andrea, disbelief on his face: "You knew, Andrea?"

"Well, yes, but ..." Andrea felt her heart flutter as Sam's expression turned to ice.

Ed smiled, shook his head, and let out an I-told-you-so sigh.

Sam turned and started down the hill.

Andrea shook off her anger at Ed and hurried after Sam. "Wait, Sam. I knew he planned to turn the place into an equipment storage area. But that was before you ... before I ... You weren't going to stay, and I didn't think it would matter," she said softly.

He stopped and turned back to her.

"It matters." His voice was tightly controlled, not completely masking the depth of his pain.

And then he was gone, disappearing into the gray of the late afternoon like a lean shadow.

Andrea knew that she'd pierced Sam to the core.

And it did matter. It mattered very much.

Andrea snapped the receipt book closed, swung her chair away from the desk, and propped her feet on the shelf of the file cabinet. The town had been too quiet. She hadn't heard from Sam since the accident over a week ago, and after she'd finished telling Ed Pinyon off, she wasn't likely to hear from him again either.

Perhaps it was just as well that Sam had avoided her. Andrea didn't know how to face him. Mamie's house had become some kind of symbol to Sam, a symbol of his past and his future. Not telling him about Ed's plans to destroy the house hadn't seemed important at the time. She'd considered it, but if Sam decided to stay, he'd have had first crack at the taxes. Since he'd admitted that he was moving on, she hadn't wanted to destroy his memory of his grandmother's house. She hadn't thought of it as a lie, but Sam did. And his silence was all the more ominous.

For the last week Buck had checked in often but had left Andrea mostly on her own, a change from his past interference that didn't ring true. What was even more peculiar was that he'd avoided any mention of Sam.

In Buck's absence she'd finished every piece of office work to be done, watered the plants, caught up on the filing. She'd even swept out and mopped the jail. The only thing she hadn't done was paint the outside of the building. And she'd have done that if she could have figured out how to keep paint off her uniform.

Andrea fanned herself with one of Buck's paper fans and closed her eyes wearily. The thermometer on the outside window registered ninety-two degrees, and it was in the shade. She was short-tempered and restless. It was the heat, she'd told Buck. She just hadn't admitted to herself that it was Sam Farley who generated her misery.

At the rate she was going, getting paint on her, uniform wouldn't matter. The only two police-related calls she'd had since Otis drove through the corner of the house were a report from the state police saying they'd had a tip that the stolen heavy equipment was being sold in South America as part of a national ring of thefts and a domestic disturbance when Brad Dixon's wife threw him out without his pants.

"I'm going stir-crazy," she explained when Madge finally called to ask if she'd heard from Ed. "Ed's a nice guy, but he and I are through. Honestly, I can't believe that he's really that broken up about me. I think it's just that I was part of his master plan for success, and you know how important his future plans are."

"Yeah, but who wants a 'nice' guy? Give me a guy like your stranger anytime." Madge added, "I like the wicked kind."

It wasn't until lunchtime that Andrea gave in and asked Agnes where everybody was.

"Brad, Otis, and Buck are out at Sam's place, helping repair the damage Otis did" was the surprising answer. 'Sam's place,' not 'Mamie's.' Andrea noted without comment the

change of ownership. She also noted Agnes's coolness, which only added to her misery.

"I'll ring Sam for you." Agnes was saying. It took Andrea a minute to understand what she'd said.

"Sam has a phone?"

"Sure. Got it last week. Needed it to organize the work on his house. He just called in an order of supplies to the hardware store. He's probably still by the phone, if you want to talk to him."

Before Andrea could say no, the phone was ringing.

"Sam Farley here."

"Oh, Sam, I'm sorry about not telling you." She hadn't known what she'd say. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

There was a long silence.

"Maybe we ought to talk about that, darlin'. Why don't you come by tonight, and we'll have some discreet conversation."

"Tonight?" Andrea couldn't keep the breathlessness from her voice. "I don't know, Sam. It isn't—I don't—I mean, you already know that I do. It's ..."

"It's been seven days, Andrea, and that's six and a half too long for me. I could come into town if you'd rather."

"Ah, no. Maybe I'll just drive out and see what you've done to the house."

A visit to see the progress on the house, that's all it will be, she promised herself as she hung up the phone and went to the car. Nothing more. So he was repairing the house, becoming accepted in Arcadia, making friends. What did that mean?

It meant that the hurt would be even greater when he left.

Then why was she going to him?

Because she wanted to see him again.

Buck was ensconced in a chair under the plum tree, supervising. Otis and Brad Dixon were nailing Sheetrock on the new inside walls. A fresh coat of paint covered the rest of the house. On the roof Sam was standing upright, surveying the rusty tin.

His hair had grown longer in the last week. It was banded into what Buck would call a ponytail, with damp ringlets curling all over his head in the sunshine. He hadn't shaved in the last day or so, and his dark beard made him look like a member of a motorcycle gang. Across his forehead he'd tied a red bandanna.

Glistening with perspiration, his thick mat of dark hair trailed across his chest and down into a pair of cutoff jeans slung wickedly low on his hips. As she got out of the car, she watched him lean down and pick up a leather carpenter's apron, treating her to a suggestive view of a backside that was as lean and tanned as the chest and long legs he exposed to the sun.

It was a pity he had to cover himself at all. It didn't take much to imagine what was beneath that pair of formfitting cutoff jeans, and she felt a tingle of heat assault her that wasn't caused by the sun. For a brief private moment she enjoyed her thoughts before Sam turned and caught her rapt expression.

His lips rippled in amusement as he nodded his recognition of the open desire on her face. He hooked his fingers in his belt loops and waited. For a moment she was sorely tempted to start the car and drive away.

And then Sam spoke. "Morning, darlin'. What do you think?"

He wasn't angry anymore. She didn't know how she knew, but she did. "You're making good progress," she answered as calmly as she could, knowing that every eye had turned toward her.

"Well, Andy," Buck said, "it took you long enough to get out here."

"I ... I was just going home to lunch and decided to drop by. The house looks good."

"Sam's a fine worker. Takes real pride in his work."

"I see you've changed your opinion, Buck."

"Yes. Well, I thought to begin with that he wasn't our kind of people. But, truth is, I've seen the sparkle in your eye since he's come. I'd hoped that Ed would be the one to put it there, but I was wrong. When I saw how things were between you and Sam, I decided to give the boy a chance."

"No, Buck, you ...,"—"you're wrong," Andrea started to say, then changed her mind. She'd lied to Buck once about David, and she'd sworn when she'd come back home that she'd never do that again. "I wish it had been Ed," she finally admitted. "It would have been so much simpler."

"Love isn't simple, Andy. And it isn't easy. There are times when it hurts. But when it's good, it's worth any of the hurt, for as long as it lasts."

"For as long as it lasts." That's what Sam had said. Andrea risked one more look at the roof. Sam was standing on the edge, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet as if he were waiting for her to ask him to come down.

"Say, Buck," Otis spoke up, "we're gonna need more paint before we can do anything else. With the social tonight, maybe we'll just knock off on any more work today."

Buck looked at Otis and back at Andrea. "You sure you'll be all right here, Andy?"

"No, but I might as well find out, Buck."

Buck looked at Sam and back at Andrea. "I guess I'm still just a father. I told you once that Sam reminds me a little of me. There was a time after your mother left when I might have hit the road if I hadn't had you. I stayed, and I think Sam is thinking of staying too. He just doesn't know it yet. Don't let him hurt you, Andy."

"I think it may be too late for that, Buck."

"Maybe we'll just run back later with the paint. So we'll have it here tomorrow."

What Buck was saying was that she could have her time with Sam, but he'd be back later if she needed him. She nodded gratefully and watched him crawl awkwardly into the back of the Bronco.

After Buck and Otis left, Andrea walked up on the porch. She might as well face Sam and get it over with. He might have played this kind of game everywhere he went, but it was new to her. Still, there was something to be said for honesty. Her mother and David had made promises that turned out to be lies. Sam wasn't doing that. And maybe she wouldn't lie to herself anymore either.

Sam climbed down the ladder, came through the house, and met her in the hallway.

Up close, the jeans were damp and pressed against him like a second sheet of wet satiny skin, outlining every part of what her mind had imagined earlier. Her lips parted as she followed the tattered edge of the jeans down his legs, taking in the muddy, laced-up, high-top work shoes and the stretched thick white socks that wrinkled around the muscular calves of his legs.

“I’ve missed you, Sam. I thought you’d be angry with me.”

“I was, until I realized why you didn’t tell me what Ed planned to do. You know how I would feel about the house being torn down. Nobody’s ever cared about that except my mother. I’m not mad anymore.”

Andrea didn’t know what to say. She had been the one who’d been wrong, but it was Sam who was apologizing, Sam who was holding her with love in his eyes.

She was so caught up in the fantasy of feeling that damp skin against her own that she didn’t answer. He was too close, and the feeling was too heady. This time she let it happen, the honest admission of her desire, the open response to the question he was asking without words. And when he kissed her, she didn’t hold back. The heat of the day was lost in the heat of two bodies melted together. Sam widened his stance, cupping his hands beneath her and lifting her roughly into the evidence of his need.

Tearing his lips away, he looked down at her with wild-eyed intensity. “Lord, I’ve missed you, missed your prim schoolteacher reprimands, your stormy blue eyes when I kiss you, your shock when I touch your breasts. I’ve never wanted a woman so bad in my life, and it gets worse every time I see you all covered up in that man’s uniform,” he croaked, unbuttoning her shirt.

“I know,” she murmured, reaching for the buttons on his jeans. “You’ve turned me into some wild creature that I don’t even know. And I don’t care. I want you too.”

“No wait. Not here in the hall,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t want Buck and Otis as observers.”

“Not to worry,” she said breathing heavily. “They’ve decided that everybody should knock off work for the day.”

“You mean we’re going to be alone?”

“For a while. They’re bringing the paint back later.”

Sam groaned and reached for the clasp of her bra.

“Wait, Sam, I have a better idea. Do you have a blanket?”

He gulped. “Yes.”

“Get it and come with me.” She pulled her shirt-front together and started out the door and across the porch.

Sam disappeared into the house for a moment, then caught up with her, a blanket under his arm. Beyond the sweet-gum tree he took her hand, looped it behind her back, and pulled her against him to kiss her again. She ripped the bandanna from his head, threading her fingers through his hot, wet hair as she felt his rough hand capture her breasts.

“Not yet.” She pulled away breathlessly. “We aren’t there yet.”

“I hope it isn’t far,” he said, relinquishing his hold on her breast as he allowed her to move again. “Otherwise I’ll never make it.”

Past the sweet gum and behind the barn they moved, down a path of rich dark earth that gave way to the cool quiet of a pine thicket so dense that they were cut off from the world.

“Here?” He questioned, swinging her around against him once more. There was a rippling sound that whispered through the quiet. The woods seemed to catch its breath, and Andrea felt dizzy as she fought to draw air into her lungs.

“No.” She pulled away and ran forward. “Only a few more feet, to”—she pulled back a short stand of cedar trees and stepped beyond—“here.” She stopped and waited for him to take in the secret place she was sharing with him.

In the center of the pine thicket a spring churned up from a wavy boulder-strewn hole in the earth. The water was mirror clear, dancing with the sparkle of bright sunlight that sifted through the trees. At the far end of the pool, the water spilled over a flat strip of mossy rock and ran off into the brush.

Sam looked at the creek, then back at her with an expression of awe. Suddenly she was shy. She retreated, wondering where the passion had gone. Sam spread the blanket across the bed of pine needles and began to untie and remove his heavy work shoes and socks, exposing big feet that were several shades lighter than his legs.

There was no turning back, and Andrea couldn’t understand her reluctance. For the past three weeks every time she’d closed her eyes, she’d seen him standing nude and aroused before her. There hadn’t been a man in her life since David, no matter what Ed Pinyon had led the world to believe. She waited, listening to the sound of the springwater boiling to the surface. She closed her eyes and wished he’d kiss her, wash away the panic that threatened her.

“Come here, woman.”

Andrea opened her eyes. He was standing before her, completely nude as she’d imagined him. His slow smile told her that he understood her hesitancy. “If it helps, I feel a little like a seventeen-year-old worrying about whether or not he can do what he’s supposed to do without making the girl laugh.” And then it was all right.

Sweet sun-warmed kisses met her lips and teased her into that same seventeen-year-old feeling. Roughened fingertips fluttered across her shirt, turning her breasts into aching peaks. He slipped his hands beneath her pants, and slid them down to her ankles, where she stepped out of them.

She expected an explosion of passion that would roar through them both. What she got was the slow tenderness of a gentle man, examining, touching with a spiritual wonder that swept away her last conscious reservation. The calluses on his palms acted as sandpaper against her nipples, and the erotic circle he traced on her abdomen sent fiery shock waves across her body. She was melting as the intensity of the heat of their love-making joined with the heat of the sun, creating a fiery sensation that threatened to erupt before either was ready.

Sam drew her down beside him, pausing for a moment, breathing deeply to control that part of him impatient now to find its place inside her.

Andrea heard the urgent beat of her heart pounding in rhythm with the rapid movement of a fat bumble bee hovering nearby, as though he were stunned by what he

saw. Sam pressed her back against the blanket. The soft sweet smell of the yellow honeysuckle seemed to envelop them, and Andrea thought she'd never felt so at one with the earth.

Then he moved over her, and she felt herself open to receive him. Slowly the miracle occurred as he filled her. At the same time the callused tip of one finger slipped between them, touching, coaxing until she was catapulted into orbit. In the blaze of glory that followed, she could hear him calling her name, over and over again, along with words that burned through her subconscious: "Andrea, my love, my love, my love."

As she drifted back to earth, he turned her face to his, tracing the little band of perspiration from her forehead with a finger. His eyes reflected his surprise, but his voice was warm and lazy, his breath a caress on her damp face.

"I've made love to a few women in my time, Andrea, but that was special. You took everything I had to give and made it more than it ever was before. You wrung me dry, woman." Sam paused, planting little kisses across her face.

"I'm sorry," he said after a long moment. "I guess that sounded crude. I didn't mean it to be. I can do it, but I don't know how to talk about making love to a woman. I've never done that before."

He outlined her bottom lip with his finger, leaning down and continuing the motion across her lips with his tongue. "Andrea, I have to know. I mean it's a little silly to ask, but was it okay for us to make love?"

"You're right," she said softly, "it is a little late. And I think you know that it was definitely okay."

"No, I mean, are you ... was it safe? It's never mattered much to me about that kind of thing. I figured most women know the score. But you ... you're different. I wouldn't want ..."

"You wouldn't want to leave me with a child?" Andrea felt the forest go quiet.

"Oh, my Stormy lady," he whispered, "I'd like nothing better than to give you a child. But I know what not having a father is like."

"And I know what not having a mother is like, Sam," she answered with a lump in her throat. "It's all right. I'm protected, though I don't know why. You're the first man I've ..." She started to say "made love to," then caught herself and changed her words to "slept with in a long time."

"Thank you for telling me that," Sam said, capturing her lips in a kiss so tender that he couldn't conceal the depth of his emotion. "You're salty," he teased finally, "and you're too quiet for me to know how to deal with you."

He was still on top of her. She could feel the length of him along her body. He was magnificent, the most sensual man she'd ever known. And he'd just made love to her as he'd promised. And the earth had moved. And suddenly she accepted the truth. She'd wanted this as much as Sam. Once he left, the hurt wouldn't be any less than the wanting would have been.

"I might have done a lot of things, Sam," she said with a newfound lilt in her voice, "but wringing you dry wasn't one of them."

"Ah, you noticed."

All this was new to Andrea, and she gave herself over to the wild-looking stranger who had invaded her town and her mind. Everything about his touch was intoxicating until he reached over and casually dribbled icy springwater across her breasts.

"Aiiiii!" she squealed, and rolled away from him, knowing what was coming next. She glanced at the water and back at Sam. He was going to do it, and she might just as well choose her own pace. Whirling away, she took a deep breath and jumped, steeling herself against the icy reception that awaited her. The explosion of water that followed her was the signal that Sam was right behind her. Breaking the surface, she gasped for air, feeling the icy prickles shoot through her.

"Wow, lady. What do I need a refrigerator for when I have this?" He shook his head, slinging the water across her neck and shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me it was melted ice?"

"Pure artesian water. The town's drinking water comes from another one just like it south of town. Purest drinking water in the South. Have some." Andrea treaded water, trying to adjust her body to the temperature. She still jumped when Sam reached out and drew her to him.

Andrea looked down into the crystal-clear pool and watched the shimmering image of the two of them. The skin that had been covered by his cut-offs was the same pale color as his feet. With her finger she traced the line of color at his waist. The same lighter shade was evident on her where her bikini bottoms had been when she'd sunbathed earlier in the spring. "Look, we match. But I'm losing my tan," she observed, comparing their skin, "since I've had to spend so much time indoors on police work."

"That's not the only place we match." He slipped his knee between her leg and pressed against her.

Andrea felt an answering tingle beneath his touch. "A police officer always gets her man, but I think this cold water might slow things down a bit."

"Oh, I don't know. I've been told that south Georgia is a pretty hot place, Officer Fleming."

"'Officer Fleming'! Good heavens, Sam. I walked away from the CB without checking out with Agnes. That was at least an hour ago."

"Relax. I had a quick talk with Agnes on my way down from the roof and through the house."

"But suppose somebody needed me."

"Someone did," Sam said slowly, drawing her back into his arms. "Someone still needs you."

But reality had intruded, and the magic had gone out of the moment. She'd allowed herself to forget everything but the black-eyed gypsy who was holding her. She'd wanted to forget. But suddenly she couldn't. Suppose Buck was back?

"Let me go, Sam." She jerked frantically away and scrambled out of the pool. The heat hit her like a hammer, and she didn't have to worry about not having a towel to dry off before she dressed.

Before Sam could begin to get his boots on, Andrea was flying back through the woods to the house. She couldn't believe what she'd done, giving herself to Sam in the middle

of the day in the woods, neglecting her duty. Charging out of the pine thicket, she ran across the field and around the barn to the patrol car.

“Enjoy your swim?” Buck looked at Andrea, the slight trace of a frown telling his concern.

Andrea took a deep breath and raised her eyes in confusion. “I’m sorry, Buck. Have I had any calls?”

She didn’t see Brad, but Otis suddenly began hammering wildly. If he was really hitting a nail, it was either ten inches long or only every other lick was connecting. Buck glanced up. Sam was coming down from the orchard, carrying his boots in his hand, his dark hair curling damply on his head.

“No. I take it that you and Sam came to some kind of understanding. You seem upset.”

“No. I mean, I don’t know, Buck. I don’t seem to be very rational at the moment.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Buck said with sadness in his voice. “I’ve been there too, Andy. I only hope he doesn’t cut your heart up in little pieces and go away and leave you to hurt. You might not be as lucky as I was. You don’t have you.”

Andrea stood for a moment, letting the truth of Buck’s words sift through to her mind. She turned, forcing herself not to look at Sam, and brushed some grass off her trouserlegs. Quickly she pinned her damp hair into a knot at the back of her head and went to the car.

Maybe Sam was ready to be completely honest about their relationship, but she wasn’t sure she could handle that much truth. What in the world was she going to do?

All the way down the drive she felt Sam watching her. Her life was changing too quickly. Sam Farley had invaded her town and changed it.

From the top of the drive Sam watched her leave. For the first time he was uncertain. He didn’t know what he felt or where the feelings were leading. What he’d shared with Andrea had been more than sex. He wanted ... he wanted her back beside him, in the swing, in his house, in his bed. Beyond that he couldn’t allow himself to think.

Examining his inner feelings was new to him.

Admitting that he cared was a risk.

For the first time he was beginning to understand his mother’s need for Arcadia. It was a truth that had always been there, no matter what else had happened in his life. He knew, too, that leaving wouldn’t be easy. But he’d learned the hard way that he didn’t fit into a town like this. Yet a part of it had already become a part of him.

At six-thirty the sun was still high in the sky and hot as sin. Sin, Andrea thought with a cynical laugh. How many people gave themselves over to pure unadulterated lust in the middle of the day and later made their way to church?

She cut through the little patch of green trees outside the red-brick church and pushed open the door to the sanctuary, embracing coolness inside. She loved the pale green carpet and white interior, the lacy white columns and choir rails. Everything was just as she'd always remembered.

There'd been a time when she'd been so glad to shed Arcadia's chains of restraint that she hadn't looked back. Simply getting off the bus from Arcadia and walking down the Atlanta streets with the promise of her whole life ahead of her had been intoxicating. Nothing could have kept her from following David. She wondered if, with Sam, she was freeing emotions that she couldn't call back again.

David hadn't asked her to follow him. And in the end she'd seen the outside world for what it really was: one big seductive lie that drew you in and used you. And she'd turned away from a dream and returned to a place and people she could understand.

But now that wicked excitement had come to Arcadia, first invading her thoughts and then her body. And she didn't have any other place to go. Andrea sat quietly. She had to believe that she'd get through this too. He'd soon be gone, this vagabond with the dark eyes and magnetic power, and then Arcadia would be as it was before.

Andrea straightened her shoulders and went into the Sunday-school classrooms that had been opened wide to accommodate the crowd for the choir's program and the supper afterward. Long-legged boys with changing voices entered and milled around, secretly finding reasons to tease the girls, who gave nervous giggles in return. When Andrea walked up to the piano, her choir quickly surrounded her and waited for directions.

By the time the program began, almost every table was full. At first the audience gasped at the unexpected rhythm of the rock music the teenagers performed, then they settled down and listened to the words of the songs. Andrea watched their surprise turn into warm acceptance and applause at the program's end.

The lights came up, and the minister gave a startled vote of appreciation for the "unusual" program presented by "our" young people. Everyone was eating when Andrea finally got through the rush of compliments and turned to acknowledge one last fan who'd been waiting patiently behind her.

"Not only are you very beautiful, but you're a lady of many talents."

"Sam!" She turned, unable to believe he was really there, in the church. The shock of hearing his voice was nothing compared to the shock of seeing him when she turned.

Gone were the blue jeans and long hair. The man standing before her was wearing a pair of dark brown, sharply creased trousers, a cream-color short-sleeved shirt that accented his broad shoulders and small waist, and boots polished with such a shine that she could see herself in them. His face was clean-shaven, his hair neatly trimmed. He smiled merrily as he held out his hand.

“May I share your table, Ms. Chief Fleming?”

Madge, herding a lanky teenager toward a table, stopped short. “Andrea! You turkey. Why didn’t you tell me you had a date?”

Andrea heard Madge, and she tried to answer. She was simply having a hard time communicating.

Sam’s lips crinkled as he turned to Madge. “She didn’t expect me,” he explained smoothly. “I’m Sam Farley. I believe we met at the courthouse.”

“Oh, I remember.” Madge grinned. “You’d be hard to forget in this town. Are there any more at home like you?”

A quick grin flashed across his face, then disappeared. “No, ma’am, and it’s probably just as well. I seem to have this peculiar effect on people that renders them speechless. Do you think we should feed her, or stand her in the corner out of the traffic?”

“Oh, the corner, definitely. That means more goodies for us.” They both moved toward Andrea, each taking an elbow as though they were going to lift her body.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Andrea finally managed. “I’m just surprised.” She glanced around at the faces in the crowd. They were all turned toward Sam Farley. A red flush started at her toes and worked its way upward. “Will you two stop it? Everybody is staring.”

“So they are.” Sam nodded, and, placing his hand in the small of her back, pushed Andrea toward the food tables as though he’d been attending church socials for years. His broad smile covered the words he whispered under his breath. “I like the red dress, darlin’. It’s”—his voice reached a normal tone as he finished the sentence—“hot, isn’t it, Madge?”

“Very warm,” Madge agreed, and handed Sam a plate.

“We could use a little rain, don’t you think?”

“Definitely. My garden is really looking bad.” Madge giggled, thoroughly enjoying the banter.

Madge and Sam kept a running conversation going, as if they were a couple of old friends, ignoring Andrea’s silence. She was amazed that Sam seemed to be perfectly content, speaking to anybody who stopped by to inquire about the house or to discuss a carpentry job they needed to have done, as though he’d been doing it for years.

Madge brought Sam a second helping of blackberry pie and filled their cups with coffee. “I’m sorry we didn’t know how to reach you earlier, Sam,” she said with genuine regret. “You might have been able to prevent the sale.”

“Not your fault,” Sam said quietly. “I’ve been all over the United States, including parts of Alaska, during the past ten years. The postman just never caught up with my feet.”

“You mean you walked? Didn’t you have a car?”

“Nope. Couldn’t afford one. But lately I’ve been thinking about getting a truck. A carpenter ought to have a truck.”

“You need a current license,” Andrea reminded him in a voice that sounded very official.

“Well. She does talk.” Sam gave an exaggerated smile and clapped his hands together. “I was beginning to think you needed a stimulant of some kind, maybe a little pure artesian ice water.”

Andrea felt a flush of heat wash across her face at the mention of the artesian water. How dare he make her think about that now, here? He was looking at her with a hint of a smile on his lips. “I’m sorry, Sam,” she said stiffly. “You just surprised me by coming here.”

Sam cast a puzzled look at Andrea, then at the tables around him. “Why? Is my coming a problem for you?”

“Of course not,” Madge said with unabashed admiration as she began to stack their plates. “Pay no attention to this ninny. She has a small problem with her head. It’s screwed on wrong.”

“What she means, Madge, is that my coming here makes our relationship public, and that bothers her.”

“No. I’m sorry. Of course you’re welcome, Sam. Please excuse me.” Before anyone could stop her, Andrea stood and slipped out a side door.

She didn’t know why she’d been so rude. Her mind was a disjointed whirl of impressions that refused to be neatly cataloged. It had been bad enough that this man had come into her town, touching her and creating some mental link that forged the two of them together. Now he’d come into the safety of her world as if he belonged.

Andrea took a deep breath, trying to calm her rapid heartbeat. She was embarrassed to admit that Sam was right. He’d made his intentions known. Outright, with no sugar-coated promises or lies secreted away to bore at her insides, he’d said he wanted her. Now he was telling the world.

And, Lordy, he’d set her on fire, carefully nudging her with his body and his words until she’d rationalized away all sane thinking and offered herself to him. That wasn’t his fault. He hadn’t forced her. Force was the last thing he’d used. Her mind ran all around it, the ‘it’ that she didn’t want to name. She’d wanted him too.

Desire she could deal with. But suddenly he seemed to be trying to fit in, and it was she who felt out of place. Andrea heard footsteps behind her, and she straightened up.

“May I walk you home, Chief Fleming, ma’am?”

She knew she’d been waiting for him to come outside. “Walk me home? That’s almost three miles.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he assured her steadily. “I’ve been told that’s what a guy does when he’s courting his lady—go for a walk in the moonlight. I figure by the time we get home, the moon’ll be just about right.”

Andrea was too confused by Sam’s statement to protest as he placed his arm on her shoulder and began to direct her up the street. They walked for several blocks without speaking. The street lights went from transparent yellow circles to golden blobs in a

black-velvet sky at the edge of town.

“Why did you come tonight?” she asked finally. “You can’t really want to stay in Arcadia,” she said flatly. “This is just a wide place in the road, where the Wednesday-night church social is the biggest event in town. You’re intrigued right now because we’re different, but you’ll get bored and move on.”

“Don’t tell me where I want to be,” Sam said softly. He wrapped his fingers around hers and pulled her closer. Leaving the streetlights behind, they walked along the shoulder of the road.

The fragrance of honeysuckle and wildflowers filled the air. The last trace of gray light dropped off the side of the world, and Arcadia, Georgia, caught its breath in the twilight.

“Andrea, I want to do this right, but I don’t have a lot of experience in pleasing a woman anywhere except in bed.” He stopped by the side of the road, stepped in front of her, and looped his hands around her waist. “If I’m way off base, I’m going to look like a fool, but if I’m not, you’re going to have to help me.”

“I know you want to make love to me, Sam, and you already know that I want you too—too much,” she said carefully. “Just don’t try to make it into more.”

He knew that her words were meant to be an honest acceptance of their desire. Standing there in the middle of the road with her body touching his, he knew how thick the walls were that she’d built around herself.

“I’m not sure that I’ll be content with just taking your body, Andrea Fleming. I keep thinking that there’s so much more we could have. I want to kiss you, and touch you, and feel every part of you touching me. But I’m beginning to think that isn’t enough.”

“It isn’t?” She stared at him, uncertain of what he was trying to say, knowing only that the tenderness of his smile was already embracing her and that she was already welcoming his kiss.

She loved kissing him. It was never what she’d thought it would be. His lips were soft and teasing, his tongue making slow, delicious forays into her mouth until she thought she’d die of joy. His hands began their maddening assault on her skin, and she was responding as she never had before. One hand held her tightly to him, the other played across her shoulders, down her neck, and inside the top of her flame-color sundress. She gasped as she felt his touch on the sensitive skin of her breast.

Her own hands had found their destination, first reveling in the newly shaped locks of his dark rich hair, then brushing down his firm, muscled back to hips strained tight in control.

A swirling dizziness overcame her, and she could feel the racing of her heart—or was it Sam’s? Nothing in her life had ever affected her the way this man did. He had to be a sorcerer, some kind of warlock or magician. If this was a spell he’d cast over her, she gave herself up to the pleasure willingly.

“Oh baby, baby!” He stepped back, hastily pulling the top of her sundress over breasts that had been bared without her being aware. “Someone’s coming, darlin’.”

“What?”

“A car. We’re standing in the middle of the road. Can you walk a little further?”

“Walk?” she repeated. “Yes.” But it wasn’t as easy as she’d thought.

The lights of the vehicle flashed brightly through the darkness and over the rise into the distance behind them. Andrea caught her breath. Sam’s kisses had left her aching and bruised, and her body cried out against the sense of loss. Feelings so long dormant had been brought to life, and she was shaking with a frustration greater than anything she’d ever known.

Sam watched the taillights disappear into the twilight, and he pulled Andrea back into his arms.

“Let’s get to the Bronco,” he said. “I parked it in the woods just up ahead.”

“You borrowed the Bronco, parked it up here, and walked into town? And then asked me to walk home? You crazy man.”

“You’re right. It was Otis. He said that all the boys walked their girls home from the social. You wanted to be courted. And I wanted to give you a normal relationship, like Ed would offer you. And I wanted to be sure that we’d have time for Otis’s alternative plan.”

“I’m afraid to ask what that might be.”

“A drive over to Lover’s Oak.”

“I see.” They’d reached the turnoff, and Andrea saw the Bronco parked just ahead. “And what was to happen at Lover’s Oak?”

“Well, according to Otis, I’m supposed to park at the water’s edge, preferably under Lover’s Oak, and we’re supposed to listen to the crickets and the lake frogs and the katydids.” He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer as they walked.

“And?” Andrea couldn’t help smiling. Sam taking lessons from Otis was like Fred Astaire taking lessons from Daffy Duck.

“And then I’m supposed to kiss you.”

They stood facing each other, arms clasped around each other’s waists, breathing in the night air and watching the moon as it climbed high in the sky. The urgency disappeared, and there was a sense of contentment in their embrace, contentment in the pleasure of sharing something beautiful. When at last the moon was free to hurl its silvery brightness across the fields, Sam kissed her.

He was doing it again, touching her and making her skin feel like a hundred tiny short circuits were exploding under the surface. She felt like a teenager on a secret date with the bad boy who drove the hottest car in town. But the boy wouldn’t have asked her what she wanted to do. He’d have worked out his own smooth line of conquest, and both would have pretended that nothing improper was going to happen. This bad boy was making her decide.

“Sam,” she whispered, her throat so tight that she could hardly get the word out. “Nice girls don’t park at Lover’s Oak on their first date. And my legs aren’t going to carry me another two miles. Why don’t you drive me home?”

“Whatever you say,” he agreed huskily, and helped her into the Bronco.

On the stretch of road outside of town there were no streetlights, no houses, no cars. It was as if they were the only people in the world. “We’re all by ourselves, Andrea. I like that idea. I like it very much.”

When he reached out, Andrea came into his arms. She rested her head against his chest without speaking.

“Have you ever done this before?” Andrea asked with a grin, watching him maneuver the vehicle onto the highway.

“What? Watch the moon rise with someone I ... care about? No. Not quite like this.”

“No. I mean drive with one hand.”

“No. I know that this may come as a surprise, but the women I’ve been with always drove their own cars.”

“That’s hard to imagine. Oh, dear.” The thought that followed had to be voiced. “Sam, Buck loaned you the Bronco when he knew your license was out of date?”

“Now don’t spoil all this by arresting me, darlin’. I’ve already arranged to get myself a new one. Otherwise, I won’t be able to drive my truck.”

“And how do you plan to buy a truck?”

“Oh, never you mind. I have a plan. I have lots of plans.”

Andrea caught her breath as he ran his finger from her chin down her breast to her nipple on one side, and then across to the other.

“Fine. I won’t arrest you if you’ll make me a promise.”

There was a long silence, and he knew she could feel the tension that suddenly swept through him. He was driving too fast. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to slow down. He kept his eyes on the highway, not risking even a glance toward the woman he was holding.

“I’m not very good with promises. But I’ll try. What did you have in mind?” he asked carefully.

“I don’t want to make love with you—tonight. And I think we both know that could happen. What I want, need ... is to know you as a person. And I can’t stop kissing you long enough to find out.”

“No problem. I’ll tell you all about me. I’m thirty-two years old. I have a little money saved up, but not enough. I like animals and children. I’m a carpenter who doesn’t have a steady job and probably never will have. That’s about all there is to know, Andrea Fleming.”

Except, he could have added, that the last encounter I had with the law was being arrested in another southern town about the same size as this one.

“Be serious, Sam. You came to the social tonight. It surprised me, but I appreciate what you were trying to say. And if you’d like to consider being my fellow for a while, I think I’d like us to take it one step at a time. Lord, that sounded juvenile, didn’t it?”

Sam took a long, calming breath as he turned into Andrea’s driveway. “I’m willing to give it a try. But I’m not sure that I have that much control. Hell, Stormy,” he said in a husky voice, “I don’t even know if I like you or I’m just turned on by the uniform. Is kissing forbidden?”

She felt his fingers bite into her shoulder. “No,” she said tightly, and knew she was lost. Although restraint was her idea, she couldn’t resist him. “Under Chief Fleming’s rules kissing is considered one of the steps in getting acquainted.” She parted her lips and tilted her head. “A very personal way of getting acquainted.”

It was Sam who finally pulled away. “Whee, darlin’, I don’t know about the rest of the world, but I hope people in Arcadia get to know each other real fast. My body can’t take this kind of friendship for long.”

“Ah, Sam,” Andrea drew back breathlessly. “That’s exactly what I mean. I still don’t know a thing about you, personally.”

He leaned back on the seat and folded his arms across his chest. “All right, what else do you want to know?”

Andrea took a deep breath and fought the urge to crawl back into his arms. This was her idea. Now it was up to her to carry out her own plan. “Are you married?”

“Not yet. But I’m courting my girl.”

Andrea gasped. “ ‘Sam’s girl.’ I like that.”

“Good. We’re going steady. According to Otis that was my first objective. Good night, darlin’.”

“You’re going?” This time Andrea didn’t even try to keep the dismay from her voice.

“Yep. I don’t want to, but I’m going.” Sam slid out of the Bronco and assisted Andrea out of the truck and into his arms.

“Oh, Sam. Good night. Come for supper Saturday night, and we’ll sit in the swing and talk, seriously.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’d be pleased to come for supper.” With great control Sam walked Andrea to the porch, kissed her chastely on the cheek, and left.

Sam felt pleasantly tired as the cool night air blew against his face. The last time he’d taken a girl out for the evening, necked in front of her house, and left her at the door without spending the night was when he’d been a green recruit at Marine boot camp on Parris Island.

He glanced at his watch, blinking the time in bright green letters. It wasn’t even eleven o’clock, and he couldn’t remember when he’d felt so good. Must be the country air, he mused, and began to hum as he walked along.

Saturday morning in Arcadia was busy. By ten A.M. Buck still hadn't checked in, and Andrea was restless. Since the previous night at the social, no one had asked her about Sam. That they'd not asked about him was more revealing than their previous curiosity. Finally she walked to the post office and picked up the mail, glancing idly through it until she came to one addressed to Chief Andrea Fleming.

Ripping open the envelope, she knew what was inside. There was a copy of a police report—from Arkansas—on Sam Farley.

Seven years before, Sam had been arrested and convicted of holding up a service station. He'd served three months in jail before the attendant had admitted that he hadn't gotten a good look at the man, and a witness had been located who was willing to testify that he'd given Sam a ride into town at about the same time the robbery had taken place. The case had finally been returned to the judge, who later had dropped the charges, and Sam had been let go. Andrea stood there in the bright June sunlight, staring at the report.

She walked slowly back to the station, her thoughts pelting her like showers of fine gravel. Now she understood Sam's distrust of small towns. It had been a small town that had betrayed his mother, then him. He'd seen firsthand what happened to outsiders.

Andrea hadn't considered Sam's past. Just because she'd been betrayed by outsiders, she'd automatically expected the same thing from him. But he'd had the same experience in reverse. Her mother had been the first to leave her. David's betrayal had been even worse. For five years she'd closed out any personal relationship for fear of being hurt. Now Sam had come into her life and made her care again. And they'd branded each other with the past.

Andrea wadded up the sheet and stuffed it in her pocket. If Sam could take a chance on her town, she could take a chance on him. The report had come straight to her. Nobody else had to know.

By the time she got back to the police station, Buck was firmly ensconced behind his desk, wearing his uniform for the first time since he'd started as Sam's unofficial building supervisor.

"Are you-all about finished at Sam's place?"

"Almost. I decided it was time I got back to work. Understand you're cooking dinner for Sam tonight." Buck surveyed his daughter with a serious eye, then lowered his head as he studied the pencil he was flipping back and forth in his hands. "Maybe you'd like to talk about that?"

"Oh?" Andrea strained to hold back a smile as she realized that Buck was about to deliver the speech he hadn't delivered ten years before. She'd been sixteen then, and the

high point of her fresh-man year had been the secret trip she'd made with Madge over to Cottonboro to get their first prescriptions for birth-control pills.

"Well," he stammered, "for the sake of argument you'll have to agree that Ed Pinyon is the most eligible bachelor in Meredith County. He's young, handsome, wealthy, and he wants you. But you've rejected him. I like Sam Farley. But Sam is a ... a real man, Andy, and ..."

"Yes?" She could have helped him, but seeing Buck floundering out of his element was too good to miss, and she held her tongue.

"Damn it, Andy. What I'm trying to say is that I think I understand." Buck's cast came down to the floor with a thud. "I understand you're two adults who might want to ... be together."

"'Be together'? Yes, Buck. That's true. Sam told me that the second time I saw him, and the third, and every other time as well. And I guess it's no secret that I'm attracted to him. I just don't quite know how to handle that. I know he is only passing through, and I'm tempted to ... be with him. Lord, I can't believe I'm actually standing here and telling my own father that I want to be with a man."

One thing was clear, Andrea thought as she witnessed Buck's attempt to be a modern parent, her feelings about Sam Farley must have been written all over her face when she'd walked back down the hill after they'd made love by the spring. She turned quickly to the watercooler and pushed the button. A high stream of the icy liquid filled her mouth and ran down her chin.

"Buck, he has some crazy idea that we're going steady. He's courting me. Are you sure I ought to do this?"

"Andrea, the only thing I'm sure of is that if you're going to cook supper and make yourself look like something other than a police officer tonight, you'd better get started. By the way, I won't be home until very late. Otis and me are getting up a poker game down here, and I'm thinking I'll just—" he paused, shifted his chair uncomfortably, and finished in one quick spiel, "I'll just sleep in Brad's bunk in the back."

Andrea took an uneven breath. The old dear. He was offering her the house and Sam, without his interference. She swallowed hard, gave Buck an emotional kiss, and headed out the door without answering.

The steaks she'd laid out that morning were thawed and ready for seasoning. She put the potatoes in to bake. One of Louise's homemade cheesecakes was in the refrigerator, and a plate of chocolate-chip cookies was on the counter. Andrea turned on the window air conditioner and waited for its breath of cool air. First she'd take a shower, and then she'd finish the salad while the steaks were broiling.

She undressed and studied her body in the bathroom mirror before stepping into the icy spray. The cold water didn't help. *Sex* and *passion* were words synonymous with Sam Farley. She felt a shudder of desire ripple up the calves of her legs, and she hugged herself. Just the thought of Sam brought him into the glass cubicle with her, and she felt a shameful flush of heat spreading through her lower body.

You've already decided that you want the man. Quit worrying your body into a frenzy. Hang on to him for as long as he's here. What does it matter now? You've let him go too far, and you can't take it back. You might as well enjoy the game.

Andrea stepped out of the shower, dried herself, and pulled out the only garment she owned that could be called provocative, a sand-colored jumpsuit with a low neckline and a gold zipper up the front.

She carefully applied her makeup, giving her eyelids a touch of shimmering bronze, and added an extra coat of mascara to her lashes. She left her dark hair hanging softly across her shoulders. He wanted wicked—she'd show him wicked.

What she ended up with made her uncomfortable. She had the jumpsuit off and a pink print skirt halfway up her thighs when she heard his knock on the door.

"Andrea?" She could hear his footsteps inside.

She groaned. "Oh no." Knowing Sam, he'd be in the bedroom in no time.

Quickly she pulled out an eyelet blouse from the chest, stuffed her feet into watermelon-colored sandals, and grabbed a handful of tissues as she left the room. She was Andrea Fleming of Arcadia, Georgia. She *was* a country girl, and there was no point in trying to deny it.

"Just a second." She scooted into the living room, raising her hand toward her face as she moved, intent on wiping her eyes clean. Then she saw him, and a hot sharp jolt caught her in the pit of her stomach.

His arms were filled with flowers, all kinds of flowers—wild black-eyed Susans and Queen Anne's lace, zinnias, lilies, and roses of every color. They were tied up in ribbons attached to dozens of colored balloons with shining streamers reaching to the floor. If she hadn't recognized his voice, she never would have known it was Sam behind the blinding brightness.

"Hello, darlin'." He let go of the flowers and watched as the helium-filled balloons floated grace-fully toward the ceiling, bouncing and dancing like butterflies. He turned back to Andrea and took her slowly into his arms. "Do you like them?"

"I'm absolutely speechless," she said as she surveyed the masses of flowers floating across the room. "Absolutely speechless. Where'd you get them?"

"I spent all morning picking them, everywhere, along the roads and in the fields. All the ladies in Arcadia have been very generous. Louise Roberts kept them in water and helped me tie them in bundles. The balloons? Now they were harder. Madge finally had to get them in Cottonboro."

"You mean everybody in Arcadia knows?" She was stunned. Nobody had ever done such a beautiful, foolish, sweet thing for her before.

"By now? I'm sure they do." His hair, which he'd tried to comb, was curling wickedly about his face. His mouth crinkled into an easy smile, and Andrea felt joy bubble up inside her.

There was a fragrance in the air that came from the man, not the flowers, a warm earthy smell that made her think of the spring and rain. As he looked down at her, the simple pleasure of their closeness seemed to intensify.

When he kissed her, the tingle that started in her toes shot up her legs in a crazy

pinball-machine pattern.

Sam released her reluctantly, leaning back to hold her with arms clasped loosely behind her waist.

“Are you surprised, Stormy girl?”

“Astonished.”

“Are you glad to see me?”

“Yes.” The words choked in her throat as the gentle motion of the balloons bumping against the ceiling gave her the sensation of whirling in space in a kaleidoscope of vibrant color. Andrea held on to Sam as if the floor she was standing on were really shifting beneath her feet.

“Come here, Cleopatra!” This time his lips possessed her with a demand that dazzled her with its intensity. His hands captured her and pressed her against him, shaping and molding her body into the corresponding contours of his own.

“Cleopatra?” she asked stupidly.

“Isn’t that who you’re made up to be?”

“Oh!” Andrea jerked herself away, looking from the tissue in her hands back to the amused expression on Sam’s face. “Oh. I was about to wipe that off when you came in. I don’t normally go around looking like this.”

“Too bad, it’s very sexy, and I thought it was all for my benefit.”

“No. I mean yes. I changed my clothes, and then you got here before ...” She knew she was babbling.

For the first time she really looked at him. His boots were polished to a soft shine. He was wearing skintight sharply creased jeans, a pale blue cotton shirt with no collar. The top three buttons of his shirt were open, revealing a mass of thick black chest hair.

“Ah, Stormy, I wouldn’t want to think anybody else ever saw you all starry-eyed and breathless, looking like this. When you’ve been kissed, you glow all over.”

“How can you tell?”

“I can feel you burning right through these clothes.”

“No, it’s this makeup,” Andrea said, pushing her hands against his chest. “Wait for me.”

Andrea went through her bedroom and into her bathroom. She closed the door behind her and leaned breathlessly against it. Never had she seen anything so remarkable. Sam Farley had created an enchantment in her house that was so much more than sex and passion, so much more than she’d ever dreamed of. She was afraid to know how much his gesture affected her. Dreamily she leaned there for a moment, looking at the woman in the mirror. He was right. She did glow all over. Inside and out.

...

They were sitting at a small table lit by fat pink candles, surrounded by the flowers and the streamers from the balloons. The steaks were charcoaled to perfection, though the process had taken much longer than it should have because Sam kept kissing her, and the baked potatoes were dripping with melted butter.

Sam was eating, cutting his meat and spearing forkfuls of potato as he watched Andrea pick at her food. He was glad she'd chosen simple meat-and-potatoes. He'd eaten enough fried chicken and squash in the last week to last him a lifetime.

He took a sip of iced tea. "Time for talk now, darlin'. I think that I can find enough work in Arcadia to pay off the taxes on my house, Andrea."

"You mean you're going to stay?" Andrea bit her tongue. That hadn't sounded quite right. She was surprised at his statement, not dismayed.

A faint hint of uncertainty touched his face, and Andrea got clumsily to her feet. What had she expected him to say? "Maybe I'll just cut down these roses and put them in water. They're so much more fragile than the others."

She hadn't made it into the kitchen before he'd caught her and turned her back to him, the confusion masked now by the grimness in his face. The stern opaqueness in his eyes was back, and for a moment he said nothing. He simply looked down at her for a long time without touching her.

"Don't walk away from me again, Andrea. I told you I don't know much about getting to know the kind of woman you are, and I'm stumbling around like a fool. You may not appreciate my effort, but don't belittle me for trying."

"No, you're wrong. I wasn't cutting you off." She'd hurt him. That was the last thing she'd expected. For a moment she wanted to open her arms and gather him close to her.

"Why are you having so much trouble dealing with my efforts, Andrea?"

"Because," she whispered, "because you're going in a direction that I'm afraid to follow."

"Then you lead me." He groaned, catching her arm and turning her to face him. "I don't want to screw up, and I'm floundering. You know I want you, Andrea. I couldn't conceal that if I tried, but I'm not going to overwhelm you, not until you're sure."

He groaned again, swallowed hard, and stepped back deliberately. "Damn, you make it hard on a man. I mean ... What I meant is ... I don't think that damn air conditioner is working right."

Andrea laughed weakly. "Sam, the thermostat and the thermometer both read seventy degrees. I'm afraid it's us. We're simply too hot. Whatever it is that happens between us is too powerful to control. It scares me. It can't last."

"Maybe not, darlin' but I'm willing to let go and find out. Let go, Andrea darlin', and run wild with me.

"Oh, Sam, you keep saying that. And you don't know how much I want to, but it's just not logical."

"Do you think it's 'logical' that I inherited a house in rural Georgia when I've never even owned a piece of furniture of my own? Is it 'logical' that I'm almost arrested by a lady chief of police with the most incredible body I've seen since I looked at the statues of the goddesses in the encyclopedia when I was in fifth grade? Ah, Andrea, I want to take you out on that porch, sit in the swing, and kiss you till we both want to do wicked things we can't possibly do in a swing."

"What about the dishes?"

"Later. Much later."

The fat creamy moon they'd watched before looked as though a stand of trees had bitten a big chunk from its center. One very tall pine made it seem tilted at one corner, as if the yellow globe was giving them a half-salute before disappearing behind the trees. They stood for a moment on the porch. Sam held her in his arms with comfortable possessiveness. They breathed in the summer air, now fragrant with the scent of the honeysuckle vines at the end of the porch.

And then he turned and pulled her down in the swing beside him, never releasing the pressure of the hand cupping her shoulder. She laid her head against his shoulder and pulled her feet up into the swing. For the longest time the only sound in the night was the sound of tree frogs, crickets, and the long slow squeak of the swing.

"Sam."

"Andrea."

"You first," Andrea said, touching her lips to the side of his neck as he squeezed her tightly for a moment.

"All right, but saying what I want to say is hard. And I want to do it at a time when you and I are still half sensible."

"That may never be." She adjusted her body so that her knees were resting on his thighs and her fingertips against his chest.

"I just want you to know that for the first time I can ever remember in my life, I'm happy. If I never feel this way again, I will have felt pure happiness once. And it's because of Buck, and Otis, and Arcadia with its warm, funny people. But most of all, Chief Andrea Fleming, it's because of you. Thank you."

He watched as she looked up at him with tears glistening in her eyes. He knew he'd surprised her and that she didn't know how to put what she was feeling into words. There was a great joy inside him and a great pain as well. For he'd only just now understood how empty his life had been and how badly he wanted it filled with the woman he held in his arms. And he was so afraid he'd blow it and scare her away.

"Sam, are you absolutely sure we can't do wicked things in this swing?" She wanted never to move, think about tomorrow, or consider not having this man's arms around her. She knew he had reason to have dark places inside him, and she wanted to fill them with light.

When his lips captured hers, she gave in to the delicious sensations he was creating with his tongue. He moved slowly, examining, touching every part of her mouth and face and neck, closing her eyes with feathery kisses that teased her into a state of churning desire. He was in no hurry, and he refused to allow her to increase the pace.

He pressed his body against her, the throbbing hardness of him setting her on fire anew. Beneath her shirt his fingertips were gently pulling at the taut, aroused nipples, trailing spots of fire across the top of her stomach and as far as he could go beneath the band of her skirt.

With a low whimpering sound she arched herself shamelessly against him, both arms wrapped tightly around him as he kissed her hungrily, desperately.

She shivered and forced herself to hold back the torrent of desire that desperately sought release. When he finally broke away, they were both breathing hard, and she

could see the dark intensity furrowing the lines in his forehead. What was happening to Andrea was not what she had expected. She was caught up in desire, yes, but so much more.

And then he stood, lifting her as he rose, and carried her inside. The screen door slammed behind him.

“Tell me that you want me, Andrea.” His voice was so hoarse that it was barely audible. “I want to hear you say the words.”

He allowed her legs to slide down to the floor as he kissed her again and again, rocking back and forth against her until her body screamed for release and she couldn’t refuse any more.

“Yes. Yes, Sam. I don’t ever want you to go.”

All gentleness and patience was gone. They ripped the clothes from their bodies, and he lifted her, entering her as they fell back across the bed. Over and over he plunged into her, withdrew himself, assaulted her body with his lips and his hands, built her to a frenzy of need she’d never dreamed of, whispering little words that her mind recorded but did not separate into conscious thoughts. Then suddenly the explosion rocked her, and she cried out as she felt tears streaming down her face. He caught her buttocks with his hands and held her against him as he stiffened and moaned in his release.

He fell across her, and she lay beneath him, listening to the sounds of his breathing. Miraculously he was still inside her, as though her body had taken hold and refused to let him go. The sensation of oneness was like nothing she’d ever experienced, and when he made a motion to lift himself away, she reached out and held him there.

“I’m too heavy,” he protested, planting his lips on the tip of her ear.

“No. I like the way it feels, with you still inside me. Don’t move.”

And they lay like that, joined still in the after-glow of something neither could explain. When he finally raised his head, she felt the sudden cooling of her body where the air-conditioning evaporated the perspiration. She shivered and lifted her head, pulling his lips down to hers.

There was a new gentleness, an awe, in his touch. “Swings are wonderful for lemonade and cookies, darlin’, but this—this is awesome.” He trailed his fingertips down her neck and caught her breast in his rough hand, creating an instant rippling effect.

She stretched and spread herself across him, yawning as she began to arrange their bodies for comfort.

“What are you doing, Andrea?”

“Just being close to you, Sam. I don’t want this night ever to end. I want to keep touching you, to be able to reach out and know you’re there.” She burrowed closer, sliding her leg across his body and threading her fingertips through the hair on his chest.

“But, darlin’, what about Buck?”

“He won’t be home tonight, Sam. You can stay with me.”

“Andrea! What will ... people say?”

“You’re worried about my reputation, Sam? Come on, this isn’t something new to you. How many times have you stopped off for a few months and found a woman ready to welcome you into her bed?” She wasn’t accusing him. She wanted him to know that she

was prepared to accept this night for what it was, as long as he did the same thing.

“Do you think I keep score?”

“No. I think you’re just what you said, a good lover, and I want to keep the facts straight. Don’t you see, Sam? I know all this will end, and I can’t let myself believe in anything more. That’s a different kind of honesty.”

“What would you say, Andrea, if I asked you to marry me?”

After a long silence, Andrea switched the lamp on beside her bed and allowed her eyes to drink in the beauty of the man beside her. The light gave a soft glow to his dark skin, outlining every muscle and curve in his long legs and torso. His lower body was lightly matted with dark hair that grew more dense, drawing her eyes to that most masculine part of him, now throbbing to life beneath her gaze.

“You’d better hurry and decide, Stormy. I can’t lie here much longer and look at you without touching you.”

She switched out the light. “Then don’t,” she whispered, and opened her arms. A moment later he was holding her so close that she couldn’t tell where she ended and he began. He moved over her, teasing her with his touches until she reached up and pulled him down to meet her arching body.

And then it was too late. Her mind used her body to block out the answer she didn’t have to give. All she was certain of was the present, and loving Sam. She didn’t want this night to end. Even if everybody in Arcadia knew Sam had stayed all night, she’d know that she’d been the most exquisitely loved fallen woman who ever wore a police uniform. “Oh, Sam,” she whispered, “I think that I want you to teach me—teach me how to run wild with you.”

She didn’t mean to fall asleep, but she did, waking to the feel of lips nuzzling her right breast. The lips moved around it, capturing the erect nipple greedily as if she were nursing a hungry child. For a moment she lay there enjoying the sensation, and then her own need to touch became too much, and she reached down, lifting his head to her lips.

She felt his callused fingertips trail up her leg, stopping at that part of her that had already melted in anticipation. How long had he been caressing her body before she woke? She was so ready that when he moved over her, she responded almost instantly.

“You’re wonderful,” she finally managed.

“You’re right,” he admitted lazily, kissing her ears, under her chin, and down her neck. “And better than toast anytime.”

“Toast? Good heavens, it is almost morning.” Her voice went wondrously soft. “We’ve practically spent the night together.”

“Now, don’t tell me you’ve never had a man hold you all night before.” There was a sudden difference in his voice, and she sensed that her answer was more important to the man beside her than he would have her know.

“No, I won’t tell you that, Sam. You know that I wasn’t a virgin. I’m sorry. I wish I had been. I wish it had been you ... but it wasn’t.” She made a move to turn away, only to be caught in his arms in a hug so tight that she couldn’t breathe.

He kissed her until she relaxed and gave herself over to the security of his embrace. “Who hurt you, darlin’? Who made you think that you couldn’t trust anything you didn’t

know?"

She hesitated a long time before answering. "I was twenty when I fell in love. It was my fault. He never promised me anything."

"And he left you?"

"No, not exactly. He was a state patrolman, here in Arcadia temporarily. After six months he was transferred back to Atlanta. I followed him. He didn't tell me. Oh, Sam, he was married all the time. His wife came to see me, and she was pregnant."

"The son of—you should have killed him."

"Oh, I wanted to. And I wanted to kill myself too. What I did was come back home where I belonged. Nobody ever knew but me—and now you." There was a silence that seemed to go on to infinity. She'd never told anyone before, not even Buck.

The pain he felt for her was so deep that he almost couldn't voice the words. "I'm sorry, Andrea." Everything came clear now. No wonder she didn't trust him. Every outsider who'd come into life had hurt her. He could understand her accepting him as some kind of one-night stand. She'd already had phony commitment. She couldn't let herself believe him, and he couldn't blame her.

But dammit, this was different. He was in love with her. After all this time, all the miles of wandering, he'd come to the one place where he could gladly spend the rest of his life—if he could make Andrea believe the truth.

It wouldn't be easy, and he wasn't sure he knew what to say. The pain and loneliness that had torn her apart had been so skillfully hidden that he wasn't sure she knew how much they needed each other. Perhaps there were no words. Perhaps touching her gently, holding her close with his body would show her how he felt. He placed soft, sweet kisses across her face, catching the salty tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Sam caught her hand and turned her palm upright so that he could kiss the center, and then laid it across his heart so that she could gauge the depth of his feeling. No urgency directed his actions, only the silent promise of caring.

"Andrea?" Sam rolled over, turning her, capturing her body beneath his. In the darkness he traced the shape of her eyebrows, skimmed down her nose, and feathered his tongue across her collarbone. "I'm scared to death to say what I'm about to, and I'll probably screw it up, but I love you, Stormy girl."

"No!" Andrea tried to shove him away. His words took the breath out of her lungs, and she felt as if she were drowning. "No, don't tell me that. I don't want you to love me, Sam Farley. You can't."

"There's not a whole lot I can do about it, darlin'. I didn't set out to. It just sort of snuck up on me. To begin with, it seemed as if there were some kind of cloud that followed you everywhere you went, raining pure lust on me every time I got close to you."

"Lust I can handle, Sam. I'm willing to admit, that same cloud is showering me with a healthy dose of the same thing. Otherwise, why would I let you spend the night when the whole town will have spread the news from here to the county seat by morning?"

His body was doing strange things as he felt the faint stirrings of movement beneath him. A stolen moment now and then wasn't going to be enough for either of them, and

sooner or later Andrea was going to believe it too.

“Andrea, I think you really ought to accept the fact that I’m going to stay here in Arcadia. I’m beginning to believe that it is possible to trust the people you live with. I’m going to make you trust me. But it’s more than that. You’re going to teach me how to belong.”

“But you don’t belong here, Sam. You think you trust me, but you don’t. If you did, you’d ...” She couldn’t tell him that she knew he’d been arrested. She didn’t want his honesty now. She didn’t want to love Sam Farley.

“I’d tell you about having been in jail?”

She gasped. He must have been reading her mind. His fingertips were certainly reading her body, and she couldn’t tell whether her reaction was to the words or his touch.

“Yes,” she croaked hoarsely.

“I thought you probably knew about that. I was twenty, in the wrong place at the wrong time. It happened in a little town outside of Little Rock, Arkansas. A man pulled in, filled up with gas, and held up the service station. Another car came up, and the man ran out the back door and got away, on foot. I was hitchhiking—just passing through. One of those outsiders you talk about. They didn’t care about me, or that I was innocent.”

“Oh, Sam, I’m sorry. Sometimes good people do bad things. But all small towns aren’t bad.”

“I was broke, as usual, no way to post bail or hire a lawyer to prove I was innocent. I spent three months in jail. The attendant finally admitted that it wasn’t me, and the charges were eventually dropped. That was when I joined the marines.”

Andrea planted a kiss beneath Sam’s ear. “I feel so bad for you.”

“After I got out of the corps, I hit the road. My mother was sick. Construction was the only way I could make enough money to pay her bills. Besides, people on construction sites don’t care who you are.”

“I knew, and I’m so sorry, Sam.” Andrea whispered softly, running her fingers across his shoulder and down his chest to his nipple. She wanted to hold him, make things right. Reaching down, she kissed him, allowing herself to say with her lips what she couldn’t voice in words.

She moved across him until she was lying completely on top, then started to move up and down. Sam began to moan. He did none of the touching, simply allowed her to do what she wanted. And she wanted to make love to him, to take away the pain of his past. She didn’t know what would happen. But for one night, they’d belong to each other.

When she opened her eyes again, sunlight streamed across her bed, and Sam was gone. On his pillow was one red rose tied with a soft pink ribbon.

The fragrance of flowers touched the air for weeks after Sam had filled her house with balloons and her heart with love. Andrea smiled and stretched, awakening slowly to each morning saturated with memories of Sam.

For almost three weeks they'd been together for some time every day. This day was special, though, for today a fellow and his steady girl would attend the Fourth of July Founder's Day Picnic. Sam was as excited as a child.

The phone rang. Sam.

"Hello."

"Andrea, this is Lewis Kelly at the state-patrol headquarters over in Cottonboro. Hate to bother you today, since it's the Fourth of July, but we need your help."

Andrea left the dream she'd been floating through and came wide awake, sitting straight up in bed. "Good morning, Lewis. What can I do to help?"

"We've had a tip from the FBI that a stolen front-end loader is being moved down the interstate sometime today. It's supposed to have been hidden somewhere in Meredith County. Now it's headed for Miami and on to South America."

"And you want me to go out and look for it?"

"No. We've been working with Ed Pinyon and Judge Thomas for the last month covering the county, but so far we haven't found it. Can you and Buck cover the interstate between Cottonboro and Arcadia?"

Andrea took down the description of the equipment and alerted Buck. By the time she was dressed, Buck was on the phone telling Agnes that he and Andrea had business in Cottonboro and would keep in touch.

"Why did you tell her that?" Andrea asked as she pulled the car onto the highway.

"Well, if that equipment has been hidden around here and we haven't seen it, it might be a good idea not to alert the culprit that we're watching for it."

"You mean you think somebody in Meredith County is involved?"

"I think there's a good possibility."

"But, Buck," Andrea protested, "we know all these good people. We trust them. There can't be a thief in Arcadia."

"No matter how much you think you know somebody, Andy, you never really get inside their mind, and people do strange things sometimes under pressure."

Good people. Sometimes good people do bad things. That's what she'd told Sam when he'd told her about his arrest. Sam—she jerked her mind away from any thought of him. She couldn't be distracted this morning.

For the next two hours they patrolled their section. "Not much traffic," Buck observed as they reached the end of their assigned territory and made the turn back. "Guess folks

are getting on over to Minor's Lake to the picnic."

It was after ten o'clock when Andrea heard the sirens. She and Buck had circled around to the south of Arcadia and had started back up the interstate, when flashing blue lights showed up in the distance. Andrea hit her own lights, and the gas pedal. The truck carrying the machinery wasn't stopping. She quickly cut across the median and headed toward the hauler.

When the driver saw the police car coming straight for him, he hit the brakes and did a snake dance across the highway.

"Look out, Andrea, he's lost it."

Andrea hit the grassy median and whipped around the machine as it crashed into an abutment under the overpass with a metal-grinding thud. By the time she got her car turned around, the state patrol car in pursuit had stopped, and the officer was chasing the driver into the woods.

"Buck, you stay here and call the report in. I'll help run down the driver." Andrea unsnapped her gun and tore across the field in the direction of the officer.

"Be careful, Andy!"

Andrea, her gun in her hand, began to circle around, hoping to head the driver off. The woods were hot and airless, and perspiration rolled down her forehead and stung her eyes. Andrea stopped, listening for some indication of the direction her quarry was taking.

Silence.

Finally she heard a soft crackling of footsteps to her right. Someone was hiding in the thicket just ahead. Andrea worked her way toward the thick brush, her heart hammering in her throat. What in God's name had ever made her think she could be a police officer? Finally she reached the over-grown area.

"Come out with your hands up, and I won't shoot!"

"Andy!" Lewis stood up. "I thought you were our man!"

"Damn! Where'd he go, Lewis?"

"I don't know. Holed up somewhere, maybe, if he hasn't passed out from that lick on the head. Let's pack it in until we can get some help."

When they came out of the woods, a bevy of cars were gathered around the crashed equipment hauler.

"And nobody at the weigh station saw it come by?" Buck was talking with a heavysset older state trooper whom Andrea recognized as the major in charge.

"That's got to be the stolen equipment," Ed Pinyon was saying. "No question about it."

"Don't guess he came back this way, did he?" Lewis asked hopefully.

"No." Buck shook his head. "Did anybody get a good look at him?"

Lewis shook his head. "All I can tell you is that he was tall and had a bloody forehead."

There was a spidery, bloodstained network of cracks in the windshield on the driver's side. The glass wasn't broken, but the blow had been hard enough to cause the driver grave injury.

“Well,” Lewis added with a puzzled look, “I can’t figure where he came from. That thing’s too big to get through these backroads and bridges without either being seen or getting stuck somewhere.”

“Maybe he had help,” Ed suggested. “But we don’t have any criminals around here, unless—” he gave a long pause—“the inside man is a newcomer, an outsider with special connections.”

For a minute Andrea couldn’t believe what she’d heard.

“We just missed the hiding place, Ed,” Buck interjected sharply. A second patrol car had appeared, and the officer was directing traffic around the crashed hauler. “Andy, give us a hand over here.”

A horrible sense of déjà vu washed over Andrea. She shook off Buck’s motion and stared at Ed in shock. “I hope that you don’t mean what I think you do, Ed. Because the only newcomer around here is Sam Farley.”

“Exactly my point, Andrea. What do we know about the man?” Ed turned to Buck. “Don’t you think you ought to check him out, Chief?”

“But,” Lewis began, “Andrea already—”

“Knows enough about Sam Farley,” Andrea interrupted, “to agree to marry him.”

There was a shocked “Andy?” by Buck and Ed at the same time. Then silence.

“Ah, has anybody called the wrecker?” Lewis broke the silence, directing their attention back to the accident. Though Andrea knew he didn’t understand what she was doing, he was willing to go along for the moment.

“I did,” Buck answered, “but they don’t want the truck moved until the FBI gets here.” He took Andrea’s arm and turned her toward the patrol car. “You get on back to town and check out the picnic. With the thief loose, I don’t want anybody in town to decide to get up a search party.”

“But, Buck,” Andrea protested, whipping her head around to look back at Ed.

“Now, Andrea. We’ll talk later.” Buck stumbled on his cast, but his tone didn’t allow any argument. He wasn’t going to let her have this out with Ed. “You’re still the chief of police, Andrea Fleming, and you’re on duty.”

Buck turned back to the others with a look that told them he was ready to do battle with anybody who disagreed. “As for you, Ed,” he growled, “I think you’d better get to the picnic. You have a speech to make, don’t you? Though I’m certain you’ve already said enough.”

After making a point of telling Lewis that she’d talk to him later, Andrea left the scene of the accident. She spent an hour in the police station, answering the phone and reassuring the residents that there was no manhunt for a desperate criminal.

Ed’s insinuation that Sam might be involved in the theft of the machinery kept going round and round in her mind. She couldn’t forget that Sam had once been accused of a crime. Not telling Buck about Sam’s past weighed heavily on her conscience. Loving Sam had made her dishonest, and she didn’t like the feeling.

She debated about calling Sam, but she didn’t want him involved until she’d straightened out the situation. She couldn’t tell him what had happened. She didn’t want to tell the truth, and she couldn’t lie. This morning she had to be Chief Andrea Fleming

of the Arcadia Police Department.

Sam put the finishing touches on the swing, added a couple of matching bright pillows on the seat of the rocking chairs, stood, and looked around. Except for two broken steps leading up to the porch, he was satisfied. What he was seeing matched the picture he'd carried around all those years in his mind. All he needed now was lemonade and cookies—and Andrea.

He'd tried to reach Andrea all morning. Agnes had told him that she and Buck had gone over to Cottonboro on police business. She hadn't called him, and he couldn't help but be uneasy. What kind of police business would they be involved in on the Fourth of July? The picnic would be getting started shortly, and Sam admitted that he was looking forward to it. But he'd wait until he heard from Andrea.

In the meantime he'd fix the broken steps and put a coat of paint on them. He measured the board and started toward the back where the tools and equipment that he'd borrowed from Louise Roberts were stored. In the last three weeks business had really taken off, and he was saving all his money for the taxes.

Ten years before, when he'd started his odyssey, he'd promised himself that he'd earn his own way wherever he went. He'd accomplished that and more, sending money back to the little bank in South Carolina where he'd started his original account when he'd gone into the marines. Once he'd paid his mother's final doctors and hospital bills, he'd been nearly broke. But, with the help of Otis and Brad, he'd managed the repairs on his house and traded out a job for the down payment on the used truck parked at the back door. At the rate he was picking up local work, it looked as if he might be able to pay off the taxes before the deadline. Andrea would be surprised.

Sam took the sawhorses and arranged them so that the old door he'd found in the barn made a worktable. He laid a piece of lumber on the platform and measured off the proper length for the step, reached for his electric saw, and turned it on. The noise of the motor concealed the sound of the approaching car.

Ed Pinyon caught him by surprise, or Ed would never have knocked him down. Though stunned by the blow, Sam managed to switch off the electric saw and drop it to the ground as he staggered to his feet.

"What the hell, Pinyon?"

"Andrea Fleming is mine, Farley. I've waited for her for six years. You aren't going to marry her, no matter what she says. I won't be made the laughingstock of the county by some no-account drifter."

Sam blinked, unable to believe the man standing before him. "Marry Andrea?" Ed Pinyon must be drunk. What was wrong with the man? There was a desperation in his eyes that made Sam take him seriously. He'd seen that look before—when he'd been in jail.

When Ed came at him this time, he stepped out of the way, catching the force of the blow on his shoulder. He wasn't hurt, but already unsteady from the knock on his head, he was unable to prevent himself from falling. This time he hit the ground. Ed turned

around and came charging back. Sam whirled away, catching his forehead against the blade of the saw as he tried to roll out of reach of Ed's foot. The last thing Sam remembered was the sight of the sun dappling through the leaves of the large chinaberry tree above him.

When Sam came to, Ed was gone, leaving him with a bloody forehead from his collision with the sawblade and a giant-size headache that echoed behind his eyeballs as he washed the crusted blood away. He didn't know where Ed got the idea that he and Andrea were getting married, but he could understand the man's reaction. He'd felt like taking a swing at Ed a time or two himself. Still, marriage? He hadn't dared verbalize the idea more than one time. Andrea hadn't liked it.

He rubbed his chin and grinned. That he'd been decked by somebody like Ed Pinyon was hard for him to believe. There'd been a time when he would have reduced Ed to nothing for even thinking of threatening him. But Andrea had changed that, and him too.

Suddenly he wanted to hear Andrea's voice.

Sam went to the phone. "Vera, what's happening?"

"I wondered where you were." Vera told him about the chase and the wreck over on the interstate.

"Andrea," he interrupted, his heart in his throat. "Is Andrea all right?"

"Sure. She's on her way over to the lake to check out the picnic. Official duty, you know."

"Damn. Why didn't she call me?"

"She tried, but when you didn't answer, she thought you might have gone on ahead. If you hurry, you ought to be able to get there by the time she does."

"Thanks, Vera. If she checks in again, I'm on my way."

"After he cracked his head, the crook took off running into the woods. Disappeared completely," Ed was saying to a group of wide-eyed men by the corner of the platform where the political speeches would be delivered.

Andrea avoided Ed as she made her rounds, keeping herself visible. After what Ed had said earlier, she was uneasy. She hadn't thought he would be so upset about Sam and her. Apparently she'd been wrong.

She wiped her face with one of Buck's large white handkerchiefs. She looked longingly at the youngsters splashing noisily in the lake, wishing she could jump in and wash away some of the tightness in her body.

By now the crowd seemed unusually tense, too, gathering in little groups under the hundred-year-old oaks hung with Spanish moss. The behind-the-pavilion refreshments, for men only, had been doing a big business, and Andrea wished Buck would hurry and get there. Something was going to happen—she could feel it.

She was almost glad she hadn't been able to get Sam on the phone. Andrea hoped that he'd stay away. Her crack about marriage had popped out from sheer anger at Ed's suggestion that Sam might be involved in the machinery thefts. There was no way she'd

believe that, and she wouldn't let anybody else think it either.

Halfway back to the main picnic area she heard a hush in the crowd that alerted her to trouble. Something was wrong. She knew it before she reached the circle of men surrounding ... Sam?

"What did I tell you?" Ed was asking derisively. "Does the man have a busted head or not?"

"Damnation," one man chortled, "if we don't have the thief right here."

Another spoke up. "Yeah, just like you said, Ed. No wonder he could fix up that old house and buy a truck so quick."

"Call Andy!" voiced a third.

"Not Andy, you fool." Ed's voice came clear. "Why would she arrest her lover? She's probably been protecting him all along. How else could that loader have been hidden around here without us knowing it?"

In the center of the jeering men stood a grim Sam Farley. Andrea started forward, then came to a stop when she saw the angry red marks on his forehead.

The crowd suddenly parted as they caught sight of Andrea striding intently across the shaded clearing.

Andrea wanted to scream at Ed. What was he trying to do? Sam couldn't have had anything to do with what had happened. "What are you doing, Ed?"

"Looks like I'm doing your job," he said maliciously. "Finding the man who was driving the stolen truck over on the interstate. What happened to your face, Farley?"

A smattering of conversation rose, then died down again.

"Why bother asking?" a voice jeered from the crowd. "He's the one. Arrest 'im, Andy."

"What's going on here?" Sam asked quietly.

Andrea raised her hand to protest the absurdity of the charge. Where was Buck? She wasn't qualified to handle this kind of situation. The last thing she wanted was to see Sam accused of a crime in front of the entire population of Arcadia. She knew he couldn't be guilty, and so did they, if they stopped to think about it. But with Ed inciting the crowd, she didn't know what might happen. What on earth had happened to Sam's face?

"That's enough, Ed." Andrea crossed the open space to stand at Sam's side. "The rest of you break it up. Sam, there's been an accident involving a stolen front-end loader over on the interstate."

"I don't understand. What does that mean to me?" His quiet question didn't cover the narrowing of his brows into a frown.

"The thief busted his head on the windshield," one of the men called out, "and run off. Andy's supposed to be looking for him."

"Yeah, and it looks like she's found him, huh, Andy?"

Ed looked from one person to the other, nodding his head in satisfaction. "What do you think he's going to say, Andrea, that he's the crook? The evidence is there, clear as the marks on his forehead. Are you going to do your duty and arrest him?"

Andrea gasped. "Arrest Sam?"

"That's what a police chief does, Andrea—arrest criminals. You wanted to do your

daddy's job. Now do it."

"I don't suppose it would matter if I told you that I haven't done anything, would it?" Sam was looking at Andrea, not at the crowd.

"Maybe he has an alibi," a female voice came from behind the circle of men.

"Well, Farley," Ed said with a knowing smile, "tell us where you were about ten-thirty this morning."

"You tell them where I was, Ed," Sam answered, even more softly. "You were there." Sam continued to look at Andrea. Once before he'd seen the same kind of expression that he was seeing in her eyes and heard this same kind of anger from a crowd. It was happening again, except this time, though she didn't know it, the doubt was in the eyes of the one person in the world he cared about.

There was a catch of desperation in Andrea's voice that she couldn't hide as she spoke. "An equipment hauler carrying a stolen John Deere loader crashed over on the freeway, Sam. The driver crashed his head against the windshield and escaped."

"I see."

"Talk to us, Sam," Andrea said somberly. "Tell them what happened to your head." Andrea knew now what it meant to have your life flash before your eyes. No matter what happened, everything was ruined. Unless she could get Sam away from the crowd, they were going to convict him all over again. She had to do something quickly. No matter what her heart and mind told her, she was still a police officer sworn to do her duty.

This couldn't be happening. Sam saw the conflicting emotions on Andrea's face. He couldn't do anything but stand and wait. Ed Pinyon had won, and Sam hadn't known they were involved in a war. It didn't matter to him what the others thought—only what Andrea thought. Nothing he could say was going to make any difference. Still, he had to try.

"I don't suppose you plan to say anything helpful, Pinyon, like telling the truth about what happened to my head, do you?"

"Me?" Ed's laugh was mocking, an expression of his disbelief at the absurdity of Sam's statement. "Why would I try to help you? The evidence is right here, for all the world to see."

"No?" Sam agreed, drawing his eyes away from Andrea. "I can't say that I'd do anything differently myself if I were you. I don't know anything about any heavy equipment, Andrea, but I can see that nothing I can say is going to matter now." He turned and walked slowly to the police car parked at the entrance to the park.

"Wait, Sam!" Andrea started after him.

Madge came charging into the circle and shook Ed's arm angrily. "Ed, you idiot. Why are you doing this?" She ran after Andrea. "You can't arrest Sam."

"I know," Andrea agreed, "but I've got to get him away from here before this crowd gets out of control."

Andrea looked around and heard the growing murmur of unrest in the crowd. She didn't have any choice. Ed's followers were beginning to sound like a lynch mob in an old Western movie. If she was going to protect Sam, she'd have to put him under arrest

until she could get to the bottom of this.

Andrea unclipped the billy club from her belt. "Out of the way, men, out of the way."

After a few carefully placed jabs, the crowd began to scatter. They realized that she was serious. "Get in the car, Sam—quick. I'm going to have to arrest you—for your own protection."

He stared at her sadly for a moment. "I know." He got into the backseat of the patrol car, staring straight ahead as she closed the door and walked quickly around to the driver's side.

"We'll get you out before dark," Louise Roberts promised Sam through the open window beside him.

"I'm ashamed of you, Andrea Fleming," another neighbor said in disgust.

"Fool women," Ed's voice rose above the rest. "What else can you expect? He's got them all hypnotized."

Andrea reached Buck on the CB and told him what had happened. All the way back to town she wished that the highway would open up and swallow them, car and all. She waited for Sam to say something in his defense. He didn't. She didn't realize she was crying until the tears dropped from her face onto her shirt.

"I'm so sorry, Sam. I know you didn't do it. It was that wild crowd of Ed's. They'd had too much to drink, and then you came in with your head injured. Just tell me what happened so that I have something to work with."

Sam sat staring straight ahead, tight-lipped and silent. He didn't answer. The look on Andrea's face and the fact that she'd arrested him were statement enough of her belief. He should have known better. *Trust* was just a fancy word that applied to other people.

"Aren't you even going to defend yourself, Sam? If your head didn't break the windshield on that truck, how did you injure it?"

"It was all a lie, wasn't it, Andrea? All this talk about trust and acceptance. Arcadia is no different from any other place. Your locks just aren't out in the open where they can be seen. Well, I've been this route before, darlin', so it's up to you. You do whatever you have to."

Andrea parked the car at the side of the police station, walked around to open his door, and stood waiting for Sam to precede her inside.

"Don't make me lock you up, Sam. Tell me the truth."

"The truth? Wouldn't help, darlin'. In this case the truth sounds like a lie. Besides, if your fine citizens have to choose between an outsider and a future governor, I don't have the chance of a snow-ball in hell."

"I don't understand."

"No? Well I do." Sam went into the cell and sat down on Brad's favorite bunk. "I think I'll wait for Buck."

Andrea closed the cell door and leaned her face against the bars. How could she defend Sam if he wouldn't defend himself?

She was scared. The circumstances were just too damning. The equipment thefts had begun just before Sam came. Even Buck had thought that some local person was involved. But she knew everybody in Arcadia. They were her people. They couldn't be

guilty of international theft, no matter what Buck had thought. It had to be an outsider, and though she knew it couldn't be true, the inescapable truth was that the only outsider was Sam.

Round and round the argument went in her mind. And then she remembered Sam in her living room, carrying all those balloons and flowers. Trust? Duty? She didn't know anymore where to draw the line. All she knew was that Sam couldn't be a thief. She paced up and down. Acutely aware that Sam was in the cell behind her, she felt as if she were on fire.

She'd accepted him from the beginning as a temporary part of her life. Then he'd begun to make plans for the future, and she'd begun to believe. "I love you, Stormy girl," he'd said—just once. But she'd never told him that she loved him too.

"Sam?"

There was no answer. She could hear him breathing, so she knew that he was aware of her.

"Sam, please listen to me. I may not have a chance to say this again before they take you over to Cottonboro, but I want you to know ..." She caught her breath. Her legs were weak, and she had a hard time standing.

"What, Andrea?" His voice was wooden, expressionless.

"I want you to know that I love you. Arresting you was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. You have to understand that I did it to protect you. It was my duty."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Yes, Sam, my duty. After all, the evidence was there, so obvious that everyone could see."

"Do you really believe I'm guilty, Andrea?"

"Of course not. But that isn't the point now. Oh, Sam, tell me the truth. I trust you." She was holding on to the bars now, staring inside at the man watching her silently from the shadows.

"You say you do, Stormy girl, but I see the questions in your eyes. That tells me what your words don't, that *trust* isn't synonymous with *love*."

"Oh, Sam, I do love you."

"Then I suggest you ask Ed what happened to my face. It must be obvious why Ed's trying to pin this on me. He's determined not to lose you, darlin'."

"Ed? He's just been drinking. He's acting like a fool, but I've known Ed all my life. I trust ..."

"Ed belongs in Arcadia. He's lived here all his life, so that automatically makes him trustworthy. And that's what I mean, Andrea."

Andrea watched as Sam swung his feet around and lay back on the bunk. He'd closed himself off from her, and she felt her heart split with pain she'd never felt before. Sam wasn't guilty, and she'd have to prove it. She wasn't going to let her town become part of the dark places in his past.

Why had Sam asked Ed to explain what happened to his forehead? There was something wrong. There'd been something wrong back at the accident site. If heavy equipment had been stored in the county, Ed ought to have known where. He covered

the county from one end to the other every day. He knew how much space was required. He had large storage areas and some of that same kind of equipment himself. Ed ought ... Ed!

Andrea turned around and left the station in a rush, taking time only to let Agnes know where she was heading.

A half hour later Andrea was vaulting the security fence around Ed's storage area. The man inside the warehouse must have thought she had backup, because he didn't even try to escape when she opened the door and looked inside. She cuffed him to the building, listening to his protest that he wasn't the thief. He'd been hired to drive the rig, that's all. She could just check with the man who'd hired him—Ed Pinyon.

Andrea put in a call for Buck on her radio, asking him to pick up Ed and meet her at Pinyon Construction's equipment barn. In less than ten minutes a state-patrol car was pulling in with the major, Lewis, Buck, and a subdued Ed Pinyon inside.

Lewis accompanied Andrea and her prisoner back to Arcadia, where they would sort out the details.

"What made you think of looking for the driver there, Andy?" Buck asked as they herded the two men inside the police station.

"It was Sam's idea," she admitted, "something he said. Sam! Will you unlock his cell and let him out, Buck?" Andrea asked.

"Not necessary," Sam said quietly, stepping into the corridor. "The cell was never locked to begin with."

Andrea let out a deep sigh of relief. She'd known that the cell was open. He hadn't left. Now he was standing there, looking at her with a sad expression carved in deep lines across his face. His silence made the great wrong they'd done him even harder to bear. She'd said he was innocent, but there'd been a tiny doubt that she hadn't been able to hide.

Sam had known the truth all along. Sam had had to be hurt for her to understand the truth. Somehow she'd made Arcadia and the people who lived there her own security blanket, and one of them had let her down.

She had to explain. "It was Ed. He was using his yard to store the stolen equipment."
"Oh?"

Even now she was avoiding the truth. She was giving Sam the facts when what she ought to be doing was saying how sorry she was for even suspecting him.

"Ed's business was never quite as successful as he led everyone to believe," the major added. "In order to expand enough to land the big jobs, he had to have equipment. Equipment cost money. He didn't have it, and he couldn't admit he was overextended—not when he was being groomed for political office. The thieves got wind of his problem and worked out an exchange."

"I don't think he realized what he was getting into," Buck said in his defense. "Then he got caught up in his own success. He never expected to be arrested, but if anything ever happened, he figured that being engaged to you granted him protection. Having

his business here provided the perfect hiding place for machinery being resold in South America, and Ed got the equipment he needed.”

“Why, Ed?” Andrea had to ask. “Why do this to me? I thought we were friends. I don’t understand.”

“I cared about you, Andrea. I know you don’t think so. But I did. After the truck crashed, and you said that you were going to marry Sam, I think I went a little crazy. I’m sorry,” Ed said with a waver in his voice. “I was going to be the governor, and you were going to be my wife. I never meant to hurt you ... I mean ...”

“Oh, Ed. What did you do to Sam?”

“I went by Sam’s place on the way to the picnic. I was going to tell him that you were mine. I didn’t know what to do. My driver had disappeared. The FBI and the sheriff were combing the county. It all came to a head. I hit him. Can you believe it, Andy? I never hit anybody in my life, but I hit Sam, knocked him into his electric saw and cut his forehead.

“Then when he came to the picnic and I saw that scratch on his head, I knew that was all I needed.” Ed’s voice had trailed off, and he looked at the floor, shame and defeat evident in his face.

Andrea looked at Ed, the man she’d trusted simply because he’d lived his whole life in Arcadia. She’d been such a blind fool. For one crazy minute at the picnic she’d almost let him make her believe that Sam was guilty. How could she ever make it up to Sam?

“Oh, Sam.” Andrea turned to apologize to the man she’d wronged so badly. But he was gone.

“Go after him, babe,” Buck urged.

From the doorway, Andrea saw Sam walking slowly up the highway. His back was straight and proud. Two drivers stopped to offer Sam a ride, but he refused.

She couldn’t go after him. What she’d done was unforgivable. She’d put locks on any doors she might have opened once. It was too late.

Andrea left the front porch and walked up the hill through the apple orchard in the moonlight. She couldn't throw off the tight pain of her ever-present tears as she let herself remember. It had been three days, and nobody had seen Sam. He hadn't answered his phone. Even Otis hadn't been able to rouse him.

Crickets and katydids trilled a chorus in the silence, and fireflies danced through the branches. But the peace and beauty were gone. Andrea knew Buck didn't understand her behavior. Even she didn't understand why she let Sam walk out of her life. By now he was probably out of the state, gone who knows where, and she couldn't blame him. Andrea leaned her head against the apple tree under which Sam had kissed her. She tried desperately not to think. If she didn't think, she wouldn't hurt so bad.

"It's not going to work, Andy."

"Buck! What are you doing up here? You shouldn't be walking on that leg."

"I'm all right, Andy. I can't stand by and watch you hurt any longer."

"I'll be fine, Buck, really I will." She drew herself upright, hoping he couldn't see that she'd been crying.

"Andrea, I've never interfered with your decisions before. When you left Arcadia for the city, I hurt, but I let you go. When you came back here wounded and silent, I didn't pry. Then Sam came along, and I saw you come to life again. Now I'm going to say something I should have said long ago."

"Please don't give me advice, Buck. I'll have to work out my problems by myself."

"This isn't your problem, at least not completely. I've had a hand in it too. It's about your mother. I've never really talked to you about her, and I think it's time I did, Andrea. I met her while I was in the veterans' hospital. There was someone else I cared for. She married another man. I got drunk and married your mother. I always told you that she left here because she couldn't stand small-town life. That wasn't true. She left because I never let her forget that she was my second choice. You know when I found out that I loved her? After I'd driven her away."

"Oh, Buck. I'm so sorry. Not for me, but for you. You must have suffered very much."

"I was a damn fool. Once I realized it, I should have gone after her, but I couldn't. I was a coward. Don't you make the same mistake. If you want Sam Farley, go after him."

Andrea didn't know whether she quite believed the story Buck had told her about her mother, though she appreciated the reason he'd done so. She'd known all along that her mother was a nurse from the hospital where Buck had been treated. She remarried the year after she left Arcadia and was killed in a car accident the next. Andrea had learned the truth a long time ago.

"Oh, Daddy, I don't know. This is different. Sam isn't like you. He'd never forgive

me.”

“Well, it’s your life, but I wanted you to know.” Buck started clumsily back down the hill, leaning heavily on the cane he’d substituted for crutches. When he reached the fence, he paused and called over his shoulder, “Andy, I hate to intrude. I know you have your own problems, but I think I’d like a ride over to Louise Roberts’s house.”

“Now?” Andrea asked in surprise.

“Yep!” Buck answered firmly. “You’ve heard of ‘physician, heal thyself.’ I’m about to take my own advice.”

Andrea followed Buck back down the hill. She got her purse and her keys, and started out the door. Stopping, she turned and raced back to her bedroom, running a comb through her hair and touching a lipstick to her lips. She told herself that she was checking to make sure her eyes weren’t puffy from crying.

“Do you want me to come back for you later, Buck?”

“No, I don’t plan to be home before sometime tomorrow. I think I’d better tell you that Louise is the girl who married somebody else. Maybe I’ve been given another chance. You’d better think about that too, Andy.”

Louise? Andrea smiled. Somehow Louise and Buck seemed right together.

She let Buck out and watched him disappear into the darkness of Louise Roberts’s back porch. Andrea backed the Bronco slowly down the drive. Maybe Buck was right about taking chances. She turned toward the Hines place. It seemed a lifetime since she’d made her first trip over there at night. As if on cue, a rumble of thunder groaned in the distance, and a flash of summer lightning split the sky. There was a storm coming.

She expected the house to be dark, boarded up again. But there was a faint light shining through the trees as she drove up the drive. Even in the darkness she could see that the shutters had a fresh coat of bright yellow paint. A gust of wind swept through the screened porch, moving a newly painted swing back and forth.

Andrea’s heart took a sudden glad little lurch. He was still there. She sat in the darkness for a long time, trying to form a plan, but her mind jumped from one idea to another, and finally she knew that she’d simply have to face him and hope that he was still a man willing to take chances too.

Nervously she got out of the Bronco and walked up to the back porch. She started to knock, then tried the door instead. This time it wasn’t locked. She hadn’t known how important that was until she found it open. Suddenly she began to feel good.

“Evening, Chief. Aren’t you coming in?”

The glow of a cigarette lit up the porch for a second, then died. He was sitting there bare-chested, a square of white thrown across his lap in the darkness.

Andrea pushed open the screen and walked inside. “You’re smoking,” she said awkwardly. “I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I didn’t, before.”

A rush of uncertainty engulfed Andrea. She could hear the sound of her breathing in the silence. And her heart was pounding so, she knew it must be audible to the man sitting at the end of the porch. Her mind went blank, and she couldn’t think of anything intelligent to say.

Sam stood up. "I'm glad you came."

"I thought you would leave."

A night bird called out in the distance. Andrea had never been so uncertain of her actions. Suddenly she was drifting, floundering around without knowing exactly where she was going.

"Damn!" Sam's sudden movement brought a startled scream from Andrea as he put out his cigarette and dashed inside. There was a squeak, a yelp—"Sawblades and sledgehammers! They're burned!"—and a clatter of noise.

Andrea followed the sounds to the kitchen. What she saw was mind-shattering. There was a thin dusting of flour all over the kitchen floor and cabinets. Crumpled empty chocolate-chip bags were everywhere. An open can of shortening, a half-empty canister of sugar, and an almost-empty gallon of milk covered the work area.

Standing in the midst of this whirlwind was a barefoot Sam Farley, wearing flour-splotted jeans and a white apron. At his feet was a cookie tin and a dozen blackened cookies spilled into broken crumbs all over the floor.

Sam looked up, an expression of pure frustration on his face. "I burned them."

"What are you doing, Sam?"

"What does it look like? I'm baking cookies. Like my grandmother used to make." He leaned down and began to clean up the mess, depositing it into a can already overflowing with what looked like gooey, half-cooked mistakes.

Andrea took a long look around. On shelves behind open cabinet doors, on the dining-room table behind her, and in the breakfast room in the kitchen were plates and plates of different kinds of cookies.

"Why, Sam? Why all these cookies?"

"To go with the lemonade, of course."

"Of course. Why didn't I think of that?"

"They go with the swing on the front porch."

"How long have you been practicing?"

"Well, let's put it this way. If the birds like cookies, they'll be fed for the next couple of years. I never dreamed making cookies could be so hard." He turned back to his table and began to put his cooking supplies away. "Good thing you finally got here. This is my last sack of sugar."

" 'Finally got here'? You mean you expected me?"

"Sooner or later. It's that trust you were talking about. I guess you did too good a job convincing me about this town. I just waited out here, having faith." Sam placed the cookie tin on the counter and turned his eyes to the floor as he spoke. "Are you going to marry me, Andrea Fleming?"

A great joy swept over her. He'd waited for her. He'd known she would come. She felt tears of happiness well up in her eyes. "Oh yes, Sam Farley. I'm going to marry you, if you'll have me."

The sound of thunder rumbled closer, and a sharp breeze sprang up, ruffling the trees outside the kitchen window. Sam looked up and slowly untied his apron, allowing it to float to the floor. Andrea felt her heart skip as their gazes locked.

“Are you sure, Stormy darlin’? I’m still an outsider.”

“Oh, Sam, *you* were right about Arcadia—not me. It’s just a town, a place, with all kinds of people, neither all good nor all bad. I’ve been such a blind fool. I needed a sanctuary, and I made Arcadia more than it could ever be.”

“But you weren’t completely wrong, Andrea. Arcadia isn’t perfect, but it is special. That’s what my mother understood. That’s the sanctuary Arcadia offers both of us—a place where mothers still make cookies for their children, and sit in swings spinning wonderful tales of the outside world. We’ve found a place for our love to grow, a place to belong.”

“Dear, wonderful Sam. Do you suppose we could eat your cookies tomorrow, or maybe the day after? Right now I want you to kiss me. And, Sam, you know what happens when you kiss me. I figure it might be tomorrow before we get from the bedroom to cookies and lemonade in the swing.”

Sam reached back, snapped off the kitchen light, and took a step toward Andrea. “You know what, Stormy, maybe I don’t need the cookies anymore. Maybe the only thing I ever needed was you.”

Andrea sucked in her breath when he took her in his arms. And then his mouth was on hers, and she was responding greedily.

The storm overhead suddenly broke in a fury, pelting the rooftop with raindrops and slapping the tree limbs against the house. Lightning split the sky, and a clap of thunder racked the night.

Sam took Andrea’s face in both hands and tilted her head back as though he could see her face in the darkness. “Oh, Andrea, there are so many things I want to give to you.” His voice grew husky. “I love you so much that I’m going to stay right here in Arcadia and spend the rest of my life loving you.”

He buried his face in her hair, clasping her to him so tightly that she felt as if she were a part of him. Outside lightning flashed over the countryside as the fireworks display had down at the lake.

There was a fierce, intense splendor about the storm. Just as there was about Sam. And Andrea knew that she never wanted to tame the wild passion of the man holding her. She’d never known such joy, and she’d never let it go.

Run wild with him?

Oh, yes. Always.

Wherever he wanted to go.

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Welcome to Loveswept!

Kick off the summer with these sultry Loveswept reads. We're starting June off with two fantastic e-originals ...

FLIRTING WITH DISASTER, fan favorite Ruthie Knox's latest novel in her scorching-hot Camelot series, where a no-strings-attached fling blooms into love.

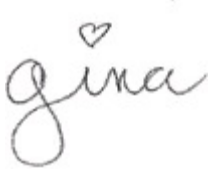
TRYING TO SCORE, Toni Aleo's captivating second novel about second chances and healing hearts, featuring the hockey hunks of the Nashville Assassins.

... And ending the month with **HER BETROTHED'S DILEMMA**, a special original historical short story from Loveswept author Megan Frampton.

We also have some wonderful classics for you to enjoy:

Temptation runs rampant in Linda Cajio's **DOUBLE DEALING**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Iris Johansen tells an engrossing story about a man who promises a forever love in **FOREVER DREAM**, and Sandra Chastain enthralls with her three searing romances, **SINNER AND SAINT**, **SHOWDOWN AT LIZARD ROCK**, and **SCARLET LADY**.

If you love romance ... then you're ready to be *Loveswept*!



Gina Wachtel
Associate Publisher

P.S. Watch for these terrific Loveswept titles coming soon: July brings

Samantha Kane's sensual new e-original, **TEMPTING A DEVIL**, Toni Aleo's third entrancing book featuring hockey hunks, **EMPTY NET**, Ruth Owen's dazzling **AND BABIES MAKE FOUR**, Jean Stone's beguiling **SINS OF INNOCENCE**, Katie Rose's utterly

irresistible **A HINT OF MISCHIEF**, Iris Johansen's seductive **TIL THE END OF TIME**, Sandra Chastain's enticing stories, **DANNY'S GIRL** and **SILVER BRACELETS**, and August heats up with three e-originals: Stacey Kennedy's intoxicating **CLAIMED**, Elisabeth Barrett's blazing **SLOW SUMMER BURN**, and Toni Aleo's red-hot **CROSSING THE LINE**, as well as Sandra Chastain's stirring **SURRENDER THE SHADOW**, Katie Rose's unforgettable **COURTING TROUBLE**, Adrienne Staff's alluring **CRESCENDO**, Iris Johansen's tantalizing **YORK, THE RENEGADE** and Ruth Owen's ultra-sexy **BODY HEAT**. Don't miss any of these extraordinary reads. I promise that you'll fall in love and treasure these stories for years to come....

Read on for excerpts from more *Loveswept* titles ...

Read on for an excerpt from Toni Aleo's

Taking Shots

Chapter 1

Eleanor “Elli” Fisher didn’t understand why she was so forgetful. She was convinced that if her ass wasn’t attached to her, she would forget it at home too. But really? How in the world did she forget all the bulbs for her light stands?!

Elli stood in the entrance of the Luther Arena, waiting for Harper Allen, her assistant, to bring the bulbs back from her studio on the western side of Nashville. This was one of the most important days of her career and she forgot the bulbs.

God, I am an idiot.

How did she manage this? She ran her hand through her unruly brown curly hair, sighing. As if forgetting the bulbs wasn’t enough, she was also having a really crappy hair day. This was her first year with the Nashville Assassins. She couldn’t blow it. Being chosen to be the photographer for a hockey team was huge, but when it was for the team that just won the Stanley Cup and had the prospect of winning again? Hello, it was HUGE.

When she saw Harper running into the arena with the bulbs in hand, she let out the breath she had been holding. Damn, that was fast.

“For Christ’s sake! It’s a mad house out there!” Harper complained in her thick southern accent. Her hair was in spikes this week. The spikes were also purple, which made it even more interesting. Hadn’t she discussed with Harper how they needed to keep a professional image? Yes, purple was a team color.

But still!

“I know, come on. Let’s go put the bulbs in.” She didn’t have time to have it out with Harper right now; she had to get to the ice. They all but ran towards the entrance to the ice. Once there, she was greeted by the Assassins’ PR rep.

“Ms. Fisher, how do you do? Are you ready?”

Melody Yates was intense. That was the only way Elli could describe her. She was from New Jersey, and had been converted into a Southerner. And that made no damn sense to Elli, but whatever, this was her boss. So she flashed a huge grin and turned on her southern charm.

“Yes, ma’am. Let my assistant put these bulbs in, and we can get started.”

“Good, the boys will be out soon. Then we’ll go downstairs for the other shots we need.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Harper ran ahead of them and started setting everything up. Elli took in a deep breath. She had been photographing weddings almost her whole adult life, and now she was moving to sports. She had always wanted to do sports photography, partly because she had such a love for hockey, but she never could get an opportunity. Now, thanks to a job opening, and being related to the owner of the Assassins, here she was.

This was her chance.

A big one.

Harper handed Elli her camera with a big smile. Harper knew how important this day was, and also how nervous Elli was.

“Go on over there and let me test shoot, Harp.” Harper started towards the goal and turned with a stick in her hand, making a stern face. It brought a smile to Elli’s face. Harper was a dork, but God, Elli loved her. After fixing the aperture on her camera, Elli called Harper over as the guys started skating onto the ice.

“Good golly, Miss Molly! Look at them! Good Lord! They are gorgeous!” Harper whispered as all the guys came out and sat on the bench. Elli took her time looking the guys over. They were gorgeous, alright. But she already knew that, since she never missed a home game. Sometimes she thought it was the uniforms: bright purple and black, with a masked man on the front of the jerseys that brought out their good looks. But nope, even with the helmets off, these men were just plain gorgeous.

Getting back in the zone, she called for the coaches first. Trying to bottle her nerves, she got started. After shooting the coaches, it was on to the team. Each player came out in front of the goal, striking his pose. Elli zoomed in, taking a head shot before taking one with him holding a stick. After that picture, each lined up for an action shot, which consisted of skating towards her while shooting a puck. During all of this, Harper offered up commentary.

“For the love of God, El, that dude is hot!” Elli rolled her eyes, taking the shots she needed.

“Hush, Harp.”

“No, really. Like, please, can I hit on one of them? Just one?”

“No.”

“You’re no fun.”

Elli laughed it off. She was starting to get into her groove, just as the captain and the alternate captains came off the bench.

“Oh, to hell with what you say. Number two is mine, after this!” Elli gave her a pointed look as Jakob Titov, the Assassins’ leading scoring forward, skated in front of the goal. Jakob was extremely good looking, with hard lines to his face, bright green eyes, and dark brown hair. He was a looker, but not Elli’s type.

He reminded her too much of her ex-boyfriend.

“Hush, Harper!” Elli said as she took the shots she needed. What she didn’t need was Jakob making eyes at her assistant, which he did. And, of course, Harper returned them. She didn’t know why it bothered her so much that Harper always flirted with the clients. It didn’t matter how old they were or what they looked like, or even if they were the groom. She always found something in them that she liked. It was probably the fact that they all had a penis.

Elli loved Harper, but Harper was a little promiscuous and didn’t care who knew. Guys had no worth to her unless they were naked and inside her, as she always said. Elli always wondered what made Harper that way. It made no sense. There had never been a guy who had done Harper wrong in the twenty two years they had been friends. Her parents were good people. So Elli really didn’t understand where it came from. And, of course, guys liked Harper. She was wild, beautiful, skinny, and amazing.

Everything Elli wasn't.

Jakob lined up, giving her his action shot. After she got it, he skated towards her and Harper instead of his teammates.

What the hell was he doing?

"Nice hair, beautiful," he flirted in his thick Russian accent. Harper just smiled widely, as Elli flushed deep red. Elli didn't know why she was embarrassed, but she was. She didn't want attention on Harper right now, not with the importance of this job.

"Nice stick," Harper said, looking down at where he was holding his stick. Jakob gave her a devilish smile and skated towards the bench.

"You are impossible, Harper Allen," Elli said, flustered.

After getting it together, Alex Welch came next. Alex was easy to shoot. He had good lines, and bright blue eyes, so the pictures were bound to be fabulous. Next was the captain, Shea Adler.

Elli blushed as she got to the close-up of Shea. She had always thought the defenseman was gorgeous. With his almost black hair that fell in the brightest blue eyes she had ever seen, and a crooked nose that had been broken two years ago during a game with the Red Wings, she had to admit that she had a little bit of a crush on him. When he smiled, her heart melted. Yeah, his teeth were probably false, but damn, he had a pretty mouth.

"Why's he blinking so much?" Harper asked. Elli was too busy looking at his mouth to notice.

"Harp, shut up," she whispered, but then she noticed that the captain was blinking a little too much.

"Is he hitting on you?"

"Oh, my God!"

Elli's whole face flushed deep red as she looked down at the picture viewer of her camera. In all the pictures, the captain's eyes were shut. Elli looked up, and Shea was rubbing his eyes.

"Mr. Adler," she said as she started walking towards him. He looked over at her.

"I'm sorry, but I need you to stop blinking. Your eyes are closed in every picture I have taken."

"I'm sorry."

Oh God, his voice was butter, thick with a Boston accent. Elli swore she came at the sound of it.

"I got new contacts and they are bugging the hell out of me."

"Someone get Adler another pair!" somebody yelled as he pinched the little lenses out of his eyes, throwing them down on the ice.

"We can do this without them, right?"

Elli just nodded. Gosh, he was gorgeous! He tried to make eye contact with her, and it was obvious that it was hard for him to see.

"I won't be able to see your beautiful face for a little bit, but I'll have a new pair soon. Then I can stare some more."

Elli stood there blinking.

Was he flirting with her?

Did he just call her beautiful?

She turned without a word and went back to work. When it came time for Shea Adler to skate off, he ran into the goal, then the wall, before making it to the bench. Everyone was in a fit of laughter except for Elli. She was still in shock.

Shea Adler had called her beautiful.

After the shoot downstairs, which consisted of the guys in sexy suits holding their hockey sticks, Harper and Elli started cleaning up and tearing down the equipment. Elli didn't hire big crews; she didn't like them. All she needed was Harper and two other assistants, and she was good. The day had been great. All the shots were fantastic. Once she edited them, they would be golden. The guys were amazing and sweet, not really as cocky as the sports reporters make them sound. They were good guys.

Elli was packing up her camera when she saw Jakob Titov coming towards her. He gave her a grin before going over to where Harper was standing. She watched as he flirted with Harper, who was playing hard to get; something she had perfected. Jakob pulled his phone out as she did the same. They were exchanging numbers. He asked her something and Harper just giggled and then leaned forward, giving him a kiss on his cheek.

Jakob put his hand on his heart before stepping backwards, a dazed look on his face, causing Harper to laugh. He shot her a wave as he left with his bag over his shoulder. Harper smiled and looked over at Elli. "He'll call when he gets in the car," she said as she walked towards Elli with the rods from the light stands.

"How do you know? He said that?"

"Nope, but I know his type. Needy."

The sad thing was that Harper was probably right.

Elli looked down at her camera, taking care to put it away. As she zipped the zipper to her purple and black bag, (Yes, team colors) she cursed herself for being shy and stupid with guys. When Shea said she was beautiful, she should have said something clever. That's what Harper would do. But nope, she just stood there blinking and looking downright stupid.

Elli knew the problem. It was the fact that she had no confidence at all. She didn't think she was good enough for male attention. She wouldn't say she was plus-sized, but she was thick. She wasn't a size two anymore. Nope. Good ole ten now. Even with her thyroid medicine to help with her hypothyroidism, she still couldn't keep the weight off. It didn't matter if she had great fashion sense to cover her dumpy body, guys just didn't hit on her the way they had when she was 18 and a size two. It was depressing, because Elli was lonely.

Elli would never admit it to anyone, but she wanted that "happily-ever-after".

She always put on the front that she liked being alone and didn't need a man, but it was such a lie. Elli wished she could be like her older sister, Victoria, who loved being single, loved sleeping with different men, but Elli just couldn't do it. Sex was such a private thing and with the way she felt about her body, no one was getting her

undressed until she knew she loved him and he loved her.

After packing everything on the carts, they started pushing them down the hall towards the car. After three trips, they had everything packed, and were walking toward their cars when Harper's phone rang. Elli didn't even stay back to listen. She kept walking with a wave as Harper cooed into her phone.

Once in her F-150, (hey, trucks aren't just for boys), she drove off towards the west end of Nashville to get onto the interstate. She'd planned to ask Harper if she could stay the night with her since she was stupid tired and didn't want to drive for forty five minutes, but it looked like Harper was going to be busy. So Elli decided to go home. She hit the interstate, preparing herself for the drive. It was probably good that she was going home. She had forgotten to call Ally, her neighbor, to let her dog out.

When Elli had purchased the old country home outside of Nashville five years ago, it had seemed like a great idea. The studio had been open for two years. It was thriving and she wanted a home, not some apartment or condo. She bought it without even looking at anything else. It was the house for her. After five years, it wasn't the old country home she had bought. It was a masterpiece. Everything had been redone: the décor classic and beautiful.

Whenever Elli's dad came to visit, he would always say that it was like he was standing in sunshine because it was so bright. She smiled just thinking about it. She was so proud of both her studio and home. They showed the world that she was doing something with her life. They proved that she didn't need her family's money, that she was successful after losing her stint on Broadway, and that she could live without Justin, her ex.

She pulled into her round driveway, grabbing all of her bags. Even before getting to the door, she heard her pug running down the hall, and then the barking started.

"I know, Adler. I'm home, darling, hold on." Elli opened the door and her 40 pound pug attacked her. Well, he tried to, at least. She laughed as she threw her keys in the basket by the door. She bent down to her puppy, who was struggling to breathe.

"Oh my goodness, Adler, honey. Breathe, darling." Elli pet him until he calmed down, kissed the top of his head, and then locked the door as her house phone rang. She didn't answer it. She knew it was her mother, and Elli was not in the mood to talk to her. The machine picked up and her mother's voice rang over the machine, telling her to call her. She pushed delete before going to the kitchen for some dinner. She decided on a frozen dinner, since she didn't feel like cooking. She went to get her laptop while her food cooked in the microwave.

Elli walked through her bright yellow living room. She loved the décor in here. The gleaming walls accented the black wrap-around couches that had matching throw pillows. The couches brought the room together. Her extremely large TV, a gift from her father because she loved watching the away games in HD, hung above her mantel that held pictures of her nieces and nephews. She smiled as she passed them to get her laptop. She loved her nieces and nephews, and couldn't wait to take them to the park next weekend when they came for their monthly visit.

After getting her laptop and returning to the bar, she loaded the pictures from her

camera as she got a fork and napkin. She sat down at the bar, food and laptop in front of her. She had taken over 3,000 shots of the Assassins which meant she had lots of work ahead of her. She inhaled her frozen pasta meal. She realized she was hungrier than she thought as she looked over the pictures. They were good shots, really good. Only a few were crappy. But with Photoshop, she could fix them with no problem.

As she went from picture to picture, Elli kept going back to Shea Adler's pictures. Gosh, he was so stinking gorgeous. He had the most amazing eyes she'd ever seen. They were such a dazzling shade of blue: so bright, and so happy. He probably had a beautiful girlfriend, a dog and a nine bedroom house with all the fixings. He just looked like he was happy. When she came to the pictures of him in the suit, he took her breath away. The suit was black, with a purple vest underneath. The hockey stick that he held was so slick looking. But you really didn't look at the stick or the suit, you looked at his eyes.

Good golly, they were mesmerizing.

Not that Elli would admit this to anyone, but while she worked that night, she kept flipping back to the pictures of Shea, looking at his beautiful eyes, his hard body. She wished that she was the girlfriend at his house waiting for him to get home so they could sit on the couch, cuddling as they watched highlights from the games that night, while Adler lay beside them.

Elli smiled at the thought, and then rolled her eyes.

As if that would ever happen.

"Not only did I run into the goal, but the wall too!"

Shea Adler sat with the side of his face in his hand. His glasses were crooked but he didn't care. He was beyond embarrassed about what had happened at the Assassins' photo shoot earlier that day.

"I can't stand it when I get new contacts. They affect my eyes all to hell. God, it was so embarrassing, Grace. So embarrassing."

His twin sister laughed on the other end of the phone as Shea rolled his eyes, dropping his hand from his face to get up for a drink of water.

"I don't know why you're so embarrassed, Shea. It was only the guys."

"And the staff!"

"Okay, and the staff. So what?"

"And the photo people!"

"So? You're never embarrassed about anything. What aren't you telling me?"

Shea didn't say anything. He wasn't telling Grace about the beautiful brunette with the biggest and brightest green eyes he had ever seen. She had the kind of eyes that took his breath away when he looked into them; something that had never happened to him before.

"Who is she?" Grace asked with a knowing voice, "Hopefully not some dumb blonde bimbo who will suck you dry."

"Hey, no one has sucked me dry!" Shea said defensively.

"They tried."

"Now you know that's not true. I won't even let them close enough to suck me dry."

"Whatever. You bought the last chick, Marie, a diamond necklace!"

“Because I unknowingly slept with her sister. I felt bad and since I had no intentions on starting anything with her, it was a sorry present before I stopped talking to her.”

“Oh, yeah. Well she should have told you anyway, so who is this new girl?”

“How do you know it’s a woman?”

“Because, like I said, you don’t get embarrassed. So shut up and tell me.”

“I don’t know who she is. She was the photographer today.”

“Okay, and?”

“And she was beautiful.”

“Did you ask her out?”

“No, she is kind of different,” he said sheepishly.

“What the hell, Shea? You are not making sense. Who am I talking to?” she said teasingly, “This isn’t my brother, big scary Captain Adler, because my brother’s motto is ‘I came, I saw, I conquered.’ ”

Shea let out a booming laugh, which caused her to laugh.

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t look me in the eye. She was shy, cute.”

“Hmm, sounds like a winner in my book,” Grace said.

“Maybe.”

“So, anyway, the party for this weekend is almost done, planning-wise.”

“Great!”

“I’m excited. The guys are gonna have a ball.”

“That’s why I hired the best party planner in Nashville.”

Grace giggled and went on with the details, as Shea stood in his stainless steel kitchen. Grace had decorated the whole condo for him when they came to Nashville four years ago. He had just gotten traded to the Assassins from the Flyers and couldn’t be happier to be moved to a team that was going to pay a hell of a lot more than the Flyers ever did. Plus, Grace had hated Philadelphia. Probably as much as Shea did. Luckily, they both loved Nashville since Grace would never go anywhere without Shea, and he wouldn’t go anywhere without her.

The joy of being twins!

Grace had helped pick out the condo, and even lived with him for a while to finish decorating, before looking for her own. Then she met James Justice. After only being together for a couple of months, she got pregnant. Now Grace lived ten minutes from Shea in a beautiful 1.2 million dollar house, blissfully married, with two of the greatest kids in the world, Ryan and Amelia, while running the biggest party planning business in Nashville. Shea couldn’t be happier for her, but he always got nervous at the thought that one day he might be leaving her, if he got traded again.

“Does that sound okay?” Grace asked, bringing him back to the conversation.

“Of course. Do you have a photographer?” Shea found himself asking. Grace started laughing.

“No, you never said you wanted one.”

“Well, maybe it would be a good idea. With all the new players and their families, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Do you have a certain photographer in mind, Shea?”

“Oh hush, and get her.”

“Who is she?”

“I don’t know, but find her and get her. Offer her a price she can’t refuse.”

“You have no idea what her name is?”

“I think I heard Elli, but I’m not sure. Call Melody, she would know.”

“Fine. I’ve got three days to find this chick. Jeez, Shea.”

“I love you, Gracey,” he cooed. She laughed.

“I love you, too. Bye.”

“Bye.”

He hung up his phone, tucking it into his pocket with a grin on his face. He went to his fridge, smiling at his niece and nephew’s pictures before opening it to get a beer. He popped the top as he walked to the dimly lit living room. He sat down on his leather couch and turned on the TV to catch some of the highlights before turning in for the night. He had an early practice in the morning. Plus, he was volunteering with the team tomorrow afternoon over at Vanderbilt’s Children’s hospital.

As Shea drank his beer, he found himself grinning. If Grace came through, he would be seeing the beautiful photographer by this weekend.

And this time, he would conquer.

Read on for an excerpt from Ruthie Knox's

Along Came Trouble

Chapter One

“Get out of my yard!” Ellen shouted.

The weasel-faced photographer ignored her, too busy snapping photos of the house next door to pay her any mind.

No surprise there. This was the fifth time in as many days that a man with a camera had violated her property lines. By now, she knew the drill.

They trespassed. She yelled. They pretended she didn’t exist. She called the police.

Ellen was thoroughly sick of it. She couldn’t carry on this way, watching from the safety of the side porch and clutching her glass of iced tea like an outraged southern belle.

It was all very well for Jamie to tell her to stay put and let the professionals deal with it. Her pop-star brother was safe at home in California, nursing his wounds. And anyway, this kind of attention was the lot he’d chosen in life. He’d decided to be a celebrity, and then he’d made the choice to get involved with Ellen’s neighbor, Carly. The consequences ought to be his to deal with.

Ellen hadn’t invited the paparazzi to descend. She’d made different choices, and they’d led her to college, law school, marriage, divorce, motherhood. They’d led her to this quiet cul-de-sac in Camelot, Ohio, surrounded by woods.

Her choices had also made her the kind of woman who couldn’t easily stand by as some skeevey guy crushed her plants and invaded Carly’s privacy for the umpteenth time since last Friday.

Enough, she thought. *Enough*.

But until Weasel Face crushed the life out of her favorite hosta—her *mascot* hosta—with his giant brown boot, she didn’t actually intend to act on the thought.

Raised in Chicago, Ellen had grown up ignorant of perennials. When she first moved to Camelot, a new wife in a strange land, she did her best to adapt to the local ways of lawn-mowing and shade-garden cultivation, but during the three years her marriage lasted, she’d killed every plant she put in the ground.

It was only after her divorce that things started to grow. In the winter after she kicked Richard out for being a philandering dickhead, their son had sprouted from a pea-sized nothing to a solid presence inside her womb, breathing and alive. That spring, the first furled shoots of the hosta poked through the mulch, proving that Ellen was not incompetent, as Richard had so often implied. She and the baby were, in fact, perfectly capable of surviving, even thriving, without anyone’s help.

Two more springs had come and gone, and the hosta kept returning, bigger every year. It became her horticultural buddy. Triumph in plant form.

So Ellen took it personally when Weasel Face stepped on it. Possibly a bit too personally. Swept up in a delicious tide of righteousness, she crossed the lawn and upended her glass of iced tea over the back of his head.

It felt good. It felt *great*, actually—the coiled-spring snap of temper, the clean confidence that came with striking a blow for justice. For the few seconds it lasted, she

basked in it. It was such an improvement over standing around.

One more confirmation that powerlessness was for suckers.

But then it was over, and she wondered why she'd wasted the tea, because Weasel Face didn't so much as flinch. Seemingly unbothered by the dunking, the ice cubes, or the sludgy sugar on the back of his neck, he aimed his camera at Carly's house and held down the shutter release, capturing photo after photo as an SUV rolled to a stop in the neighboring driveway.

"Get out of my yard," Ellen insisted, shoving the man's shoulder for emphasis. His only response was to reach up, adjust his lens, and carry on.

Now what? Assault-by-beverage was unfamiliar territory for her. Usually, she stuck with verbal attack. Always, the people she engaged in battle acknowledged her presence on the field. How infuriating to be ignored by the enemy.

"The police are on their way."

This was a lie, but so what? The man had already been kicked off her property once this week. He didn't deserve scrupulous honesty. He didn't even deserve the tea.

"I'll leave when they make me," he said.

"I'm going to press charges this time."

The photographer squinted into his viewfinder. "Go ahead. I'll have these pictures sold before the cops get here."

"I'm not kidding," she threatened. "I'll use every single sneaky lawyer trick I can think of to drag out the process. You'll rot in that jail cell for days before I'm done with you."

And now she sounded like a street-corner nut job. Not the kind of behavior she approved of, but what was she supposed to do? It was already too late to give up. If she stopped pushing, he would win. Unacceptable.

A tall man stepped out of the SUV. One of her cedar trees partially blocked the view, but she caught a glimpse of mirrored sunglasses and broad shoulders.

"You're going to be so sorry you didn't listen to me."

Weasel Face didn't even look at her. "Go away, lady."

"I live here!" She hooked her fingers in his elbow and yanked, screwing up his aim.

The stranger at Carly's must have heard the escalating argument, because he turned to face them. Ellen's uninvited guest made an ugly, excited noise low in his throat, edged forward, and smashed a lungwort plant that had been doing really well this year.

Ellen considered kicking him in the shin, but she hadn't remembered to put shoes on before she rushed out of the house. She settled for a juvenile trick, walking around behind him and sinking her kneecaps into the back of his legs. His knees buckled, and he lost his balance and staggered forward a few paces, destroying a bleeding-heart bush. Then he shot her an evil glare and went right back to taking pictures.

"Leave," she insisted.

"No." He snapped frame after frame of the stranger as he sauntered toward them and Ellen fumed with anger, frustration, embarrassment, disappointment, fear—all of it swirling around in her chest, making her heart hammer and her stomach clench.

By the time the SUV driver reached her property line, she recognized him. In a village

as small as Camelot, you got to know who everybody was eventually. This guy hadn't been around long, maybe a few months. She'd seen him at the deli at lunchtime, always dressed for the office. Today, he wore a white dress shirt with charcoal slacks, and he looked crisp despite the damp July heat.

One time, she'd been chasing after Henry at the Village Market, and she'd turned a corner and almost walked right into this man. They'd done a shuffling sort of dance, trying to evade one another, and for a few seconds, she hadn't had a single thought in her head except *Whoa*.

Big guy. Very *whoa*, if you went for that kind of thing.

The two invaders assessed each other for a few beats before *whoa* took off his sunglasses and tucked them into his pocket. He stepped around the obstructive cedar tree and extended his hand to Ellen. "Hi. Caleb Clark."

She shifted her empty glass from one palm to the other, gripping the slippery surface too tight because an eddy of uninvited relief had turned her arm muscles into limp, noodly things. "Ellen Callahan."

Caleb's hand was big and warm, a work-roughened paw that went with the low voice and the hard body. He could be anybody, here for any reason, but a zingy little pulse low in her belly declared that the cavalry had arrived, and the cavalry was really something. It annoyed her—one more primitive, irrational feeling to cope with on top of all the others.

Caleb pumped her arm up and down once, a strangely formal ritual. He didn't let go of her hand. A mischievous smile crept over his lips. "You're a scary woman, Ellen Callahan," he said. "If I were this lowlife piece of shit, I'd be quaking in my boots."

"You're wearing dress shoes," she pointed out.

Caleb looked down at his wingtips. "That I am. I also have the good sense not to step on your plants."

Weasel Face mumbled something to himself that included the words "might as well" and "Jamie's sister," regrouped, and raised the camera to take pictures of Ellen.

She pulled her fingers from Caleb's grip so she could cover her face. It was hard to be menacing while cowering, but facelessness was her best shot at spoiling the photos. She didn't want to see herself on the news tonight wearing this particular outfit.

"Get off her property, or I'm going to make you wish you'd listened to her."

Caleb issued his threat casually, as if he were flicking a speck of dust off his sleeve. When she peeked at him from behind her hand, he wasn't even looking at Weasel Face. He was watching her. His lips had settled into a confident smirk that established a confederacy between the two of them she hadn't expected.

She wanted to laugh, except ... well, she didn't. It felt good to be part of his team. Theirs was a temporary, knocked-together army of two, but still, he was driving the bad guy away, and his conspiratorial expression gave her a giddy thrill.

Which made her wonder if she was entirely in her right mind.

The photographer looked from Caleb to Ellen, then back at Caleb. Outnumbered and outgunned, he shrugged. "Whatever."

He started to move away. Caleb reached out and grabbed his arm. "Memory card."

The photographer opened his mouth to protest. Caleb's hand tightened. Weasel Face gave a reluctant nod, pulled himself free, and extracted the card from his camera. Caleb put it in his pocket.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Go to hell."

"Never mind. I saw your car on the street. I'll run the plates. If I see you in Camelot again, I'm going to make you sorry. And if you step on any more of Ms. Callahan's plants on your way out, *she's* going to make you sorry."

A prickle of unease walked up the back of Ellen's neck. Who was Caleb Clark, exactly? She'd assumed he was just a friend of Carly's, but she knew most of Carly's friends already.

I'll run the plates. A cop? She'd never seen him in a uniform. Unless he was a detective—they wore suits, right?

"Go," Caleb said, and Weasel Face went. He detoured around another lungwort plant on his way out of the yard, then hurried down the drive to the cul-de-sac.

Caleb had dispatched him so easily. He issued commands like he was accustomed to being obeyed. Ex-military? He had the body for it. Rangy and muscular, his build fairly announced, *I ran fifteen miles before you got up this morning, and I still have energy left to bayonet the enemy.*

It hardly seemed fair.

A moment later, an engine started up with a cough, and the brown streak of the Weaselmobile appeared and disappeared in the gap at the bottom of Carly's driveway.

He would probably be back. Even if he didn't return, there were others. They were always out there now, sometimes four or five cars, sometimes more. Waiting for news to happen. Waiting for Jamie to show or Carly to come outside in a bikini and pose for belly shots.

Ellen turned back to Caleb.

He grinned, quick and bright, and she found herself almost smiling back when he raised his hand in the universal invitation for a high five. The slap of his dry palm against her clammy one snapped her to attention.

What had just happened? It wasn't like her to get so angry or to let herself be overwhelmed. All these amped-up emotions belonged to some other woman.

"Thank you," she said.

"Not a problem." He slid his hands into his pockets. Something devilish in his expression made her wonder if he'd seen her marching across the lawn with nothing but a glass of iced tea for a weapon.

She had her shortcomings, but vanity wasn't one of them. If she'd been able to witness herself taking on the photographer, she'd probably be amused, too. As it was, she felt a little loopy.

Could adrenaline explain why he was leaping into focus this way? Or shock? Everywhere her eyes went to avoid meeting his, they got caught on some manly detail. The hollow of his throat above the open top button of his shirt, say, or the breadth of his shoulders under all that pristine cotton.

She sucked in a deep breath and got woozy with the clean, woodsy-warm smell of him. His soap, she guessed, and beneath all those pine needles or whatever, a tang of sweat that was all man.

Get a hold of yourself.

Caleb Clark wasn't hard on the eyes, but he was hardly Apollo. He had close-cropped dark brown hair, olive skin that suggested less-than-completely-white-bread ancestry, and a nice straight nose with a bump in the bridge. *Whoa* factor aside, he was just a guy who'd helped her out on his way to visit Carly.

Just an ordinary guy with a dimple in one cheek and crinkle-cornered, happy brown eyes that transformed him into a very attractive specimen when he smiled.

A disarmingly attractive specimen. Who had disarmed her.

He seemed well aware of it.

"It's my job," he said.

So dazzled was she by the smile, it took her a few seconds to hear him, and then a few more to figure out what he had to mean.

It's my job to drive men like Weasel Face off the lawn.

Oh, crap. She should have known. The black SUV with tinted windows, his body, his self-assurance—Caleb was a bodyguard. Of course he was. "Who do you work for?"

"I work for myself. Camelot Security. But Breckenridge brought me in."

Breckenridge was the company Jamie used. Which meant that Caleb wasn't a friend of Carly's at all. Her brother had hired him. And Ellen knew Jamie well enough to guess he wouldn't have brought in security just for Carly. Not when he knew exactly how many times Ellen had called the police in the past week.

Caleb was here for *her*.

"I don't need you."

This earned her a smile she found considerably less charming than its predecessors. "Seemed like you did a minute ago."

"I did, and I already said thanks for that. But I don't want a bodyguard."

"I'm not a bodyguard."

"What are you, then?"

"I'm a security specialist."

"I don't need one of those, either."

Caleb raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly toward the cul-de-sac.

Damn it, he didn't even need to speak to make her see it. He was right—Ellen had no way of keeping the invaders at bay. Dumping her tea on the photographer had been stupid. If Weasel Face had wanted to, he could have done a lot worse to her than just step on her plants.

"Okay, fine," she admitted. "You have a point."

Caleb glanced past her to the house, his eyes jumping from one feature to another, panning across the front lawn. Surveying her domain. His lips kept twitching at the corners, as if it took some effort to keep his satisfied expression from crossing over to smug. "When was this place built?" he asked. "Sixties?"

"Mid-seventies."

“It’s a nice house. If you’ve got the plans, I’m going to need them—architectural drawings, schematics. That’ll make it easier for the alarm installer. We’ll have to find the survey stakes at the property lines, too, or else get a new surveyor out here.”

“Why?”

“How attached are you to this tree?” He started walking toward the front yard, and Ellen hurried to catch up. “It’s not supposed to be that close to the road. The county wants a ten-foot easement along the street side of the property to keep the electric and phone wires clear. Didn’t the guys tell you that when they planted it?”

“No.” She’d dug the hole herself after she bought the tulip tree for Henry’s first birthday. It had never occurred to her that she wasn’t allowed to put it wherever she wanted.

She felt as though she ought to say something about that, but she was having trouble keeping up with him. He walked fast, and her thoughts kept whirling around, a tornado that flung little bits of verbal flotsam toward her mouth, words like *no* and *what?* and *stop* and *fuck* and *help*.

“Sorry, I’m not sure ... what does the tree have to do with anything?”

“It’s going to mess up your fence line. I can have it moved back, though. No worries. First things first, I’m going to do a circuit around the house. I’d like to see—”

“Stop.” He was getting away from her, his long legs eating up the ground, and an air raid siren had started going off inside her head. “Stop walking. Stop looking at things. And for the love of God, stop talking.”

He actually had the audacity to grin at her again, as if they were still allies, and this was all an enjoyable game rather than the second wave of a hostile incursion.

“There’s not going to be a fence,” Ellen said firmly.

“Your brother is crazy-famous, and you have a kid. You need a fence. I can get it painted any color you want. Or stained. Cedar would look nice with your siding.” Caleb looked at his watch. “Are you free in about an hour? I’m supposed to be meeting with Carly, but after that I’d like to come back by here. In the meantime, it would help me a lot if you could pull together your itinerary for the next few weeks. I need names and contact information for all your friends, too—family, boyfriends, anybody who comes over to play with your son—so I can let my team know who it’s okay to let on the property. Oh, and does your cell phone have a radio function, by any chance?”

Ellen’s fingers had begun to ache deep in the joints, so she opened her hand to stretch them, and the iced tea glass fell onto the lawn. She gawped at it, unable to collect her thoughts over the ringing in her ears.

Trouble. This man was trouble. Far bigger trouble than a few photographers.

Caleb leaned over and scooped up the glass. Then it was in front of her face again with his hand wrapped around it, and her eyes traveled the length of his forearm and over the rolled sleeve at his elbow, up to the rounded cap of his shoulder, his collar and neck, his jawline and that bump in his nose and those twinkling, confident, conspiratorial eyes. Heaven help her, he looked *good*. Why did misery always come in such attractive packages?

She took the glass from him, and his fingers bumped hers, and it was terrible the way

she felt it. Just terrible.

“What?” she croaked.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’ll get you a new phone with a radio. Comes in handy as a backup. You’ll have to let my team know every time you leave the house, and they’ll decide whether you need an escort. I’ll get that set up by tomorrow morning. In the meantime—”

“Stop,” Ellen whispered.

Not loud enough. You had to be loud—she’d figured that out with Richard. You had to be louder than they were, stronger than they thought you could be, and so mean and cold and unforgiving, they called you names.

She knew how to do this. She’d done it before.

“*Stop*,” she said, and this time the word came out at a satisfying volume. “You’re not putting a fence up on my property. I’m not giving you schematics. I don’t want your help.”

“Didn’t we already cover this a minute ago?”

They had. But she’d been a fool, and she knew when to change tactics. If she gave this man one more inch, he would take over. She’d seen it with Jamie. One day, she and Jamie had been ordinary teenagers, and the next thing she knew her brother had his own armed escort. He was ostensibly an adult now, but he reported his comings and goings to a team of people who monitored his food, screened his friends, and installed an alarm system in his house that had a habit of going off a three a.m. in irritating bursts of shrieking that no one knew how to stop.

Security guards oversaw Jamie’s whole life. They told him where he could go and when, controlled him, choked him. Ellen couldn’t handle that. Not after Richard.

So she folded her arms over her chest and stood up straighter. Caleb’s gaze locked with hers. *Let him try*, she told herself. *Just let him try*.

But he only smiled, his eyes too kind and a bit bewildered. “I’m here to help you. The way I see it, Breckenridge put me under contract, but I work for you.”

“Excellent,” she said. Because it didn’t matter whether he was kind. It only mattered that he would wreak havoc with her life if she let him. “In that case, you’re fired.”

Read on for an excerpt from Karen Leabo's

Hell on Wheels

ONE

"This will fix you right up," Victoria Driscoll said as she set a bowl of her homemade chicken soup in front of Amos.

Amos snorted, pulling the afghan tighter around his burly shoulders. "Can it bring a body back from the dead?"

"Now, Professor, you're not that bad off."

"How would you know, missy? It's not your nasal passages that are involved."

As they both sat down at Amos's old metal kitchen table to eat the soup, Victoria had to admit the professor looked and sounded pretty bad. Gone was the youthful vigor that usually made him seem much younger than his sixty-eight years. His nose resembled a big Italian tomato stuck onto his face. His already gravelly voice sounded more and more like the grinding of a cement mixer with each passing hour. And he must be feeling as bad as he looked, if his temperament was any indication. Always a little gruff, today he was downright snappish.

"How's the soup?" she asked brightly. "I know, I'll make you some orange juice—" She started to get up, but Amos slapped his hand down on the tabletop.

"Victoria!"

"Yes?" she squeaked.

"Stop fussing. You're making me feel like some senile, feeble old fool. I'd like to believe this angel-of-mercy routine of yours comes from your sincere concern for my welfare—"

"I am concerned." She meant it. It scared her to see the ageless Professor Cullen looking suddenly like her grandfather.

"But you might not be *quite* so concerned if our chase trip weren't starting tomorrow."

Victoria settled back into her chair and propped her chin on her hand. "All right, yes, I do have an ulterior motive in seeing that you get well. I'm so antsy to get started on our trip, I can't stand it. We already missed that F-3 storm up in Guyman."

"And you'll likely miss a few more before you retire your video camera." Amos pushed his soup bowl aside. "Missy, I love a tornado as much as you, but if I leave this house anytime in the next week, it'll be in a pine box. I'm an old man, and I'm sick. I can't go chasing with you this time." He shook his head sadly. "Not this time."

Victoria sighed. "I'm sorry, Amos. Of course you can't jump up from a sickbed and spend sixteen hours a day in a car for two weeks straight." She was silent for a few moments as she thought about her options. "Maybe I could still switch my vacation...."

"Now, missy, you don't think I'd leave you high and dry, do you? I've taken the liberty of finding you a substitute chase partner."

"What? Who?" she asked, automatically suspicious. She'd never considered chasing

with anyone but Amos, a world-renowned tornado expert. His experience combined with his uncanny weather forecasting abilities, not to mention his impressive array of electronic gear, had always made her feel safe, even on those occasions when they came face-to-face with a killer storm. The idea of speeding around the countryside with anyone else gave her the heebie-jeebies.

“Now, hear me out. He’s not a meteorologist, but he’s had some experience with storms. He covered Hurricane Andrew for a South Carolina TV station, and, um, oh, yes, he was at that earthquake in Guatemala—”

“Oh, no! You aren’t by any chance referring to that crazy nephew of yours, are you? What’s his name—Ro ... Ro-Something?”

“It’s Roan, and he’s not crazy, just ... adventurous.”

“He’s a loose cannon!” Victoria insisted. “I watched that video he sent, remember? Good grief, the man stood on a beach during an F-6 hurricane. He almost got blown to kingdom come. And those other stories you’ve told me! He nearly cooked himself alive when he broke through two police barricades to get closer to that volcano in Japan. And didn’t you tell me he almost got speared to death in Kenya when he photographed some elephant poachers?”

Amos actually chuckled. “ ‘Almost’ is the key word.”

“I’m not spending two weeks with him,” she huffed.

“Now, missy, I’ve already invited him. He’s driving in from Mississippi today. He was participating in some rafting race, I believe.”

“Is there anything he hasn’t participated in?”

“Yes. He’s never seen a tornado.” Amos touched Victoria’s hand. “Victoria, let’s be serious for a minute. I understand why you might be leery about chasing with someone like Roan. You’re right, he isn’t the most cautious person in the world. But I had more than one reason for inviting him.”

“Other than to torture me, you mean?”

“Please, just listen for a minute,” Amos continued, undaunted by Victoria’s acid tongue. “My brother, Roan’s father, was in the army and dragged his family all over the globe. Some kids have problems with that kind of upbringing, but Roan seemed to thrive on being constantly on the move. He saw every new environment as a challenge, a new world to be conquered. Nothing scared him. He was always the first to try a strange food or an unfamiliar game or sport. I rarely saw that kid when he wasn’t smiling, excited about whatever he happened to be doing with his life at the time.”

“Sounds like he was too good to be true.”

“Your pessimism wounds me, Victoria. Roan was a pleasure to be around, even if he did keep his parents breathless with worry most of the time.”

“I guess I can’t blame them,” Victoria said. “It’s a miracle he’s stayed in one piece all these years.”

“Not really. He was always bold, but not foolhardy. He took calculated risks.”

“You’re talking in the past tense,” Victoria pointed out.

Amos scratched his chin thoughtfully. “The last couple of years Roan has been taking more unreasonable chances. Before, he was simply unafraid. Now ... I’m afraid he really

does have a death wish.”

Sensing Amos’s pain, Victoria backed off from uttering the sarcastic remarks on the tip of her tongue. Amos was no stranger to death. His wife had died young, and he’d never remarried. He had no children of his own. A few years before, he’d lost a young niece to drowning—Roan’s sister, she remembered now.

“Is there any reason Roan would have such flagrant disregard for his own life?” she asked.

“Well ... he took Kim’s death pretty hard, as we all did, but he’s never seemed exactly depressed about it.”

Victoria shook her head. When she’d lost her father, it had given her a keener appreciation of life. She couldn’t see how the demise of a loved one would give anyone a death wish.

“Anyway,” Amos continued, “we’re all concerned about the boy, and I think you might be able to help.”

“How?” she asked, once again suspicious.

Amos patted her arm affectionately. “You’re no shrinking violet. You experience life fully, yet you have a strong survival instinct. Most people never see even one tornado. You’ve witnessed dozens, yet you never put yourself in any real danger. I thought that if Roan could spend some time with you, if you could show him a tornado or two, he would see that it’s possible to feel all the excitement life has to offer without continually risking his neck.”

Victoria fiddled with the end of her long, auburn braid. Amos was putting her in an awkward position. If she refused to go storm chasing with Roan Cullen, she would be insensitive to Amos’s worries about his nephew. But if she agreed, she might be endangering herself. She had her own reasons for avoiding people who didn’t hold a healthy respect for the power of a storm.

In the face of her indecision, Amos added the final, irresistible incentive: “I’ll let you take the van.”

Victoria’s mouth dropped open. “You mean you’d actually let me drive the Chasemobile? Take it out of your sight?” In the year since he’d bought the minivan and loaded it up with a mind-boggling array of weather-sensing and communications equipment, he’d hardly let anyone else ride in it, much less drive it. Victoria couldn’t blame him. He had well over thirty thousand dollars invested in the vehicle.

“I have complete faith in you, my girl. You’re a good driver, and you keep your head during tense situations.”

Victoria sipped another spoonful of soup. “I could call you from the road, I suppose, and get your forecasts—”

“Dang it, missy, what’s the point of hauling around that computer if you’re going to hang on my apron strings? You can do your own forecasts.”

Victoria went silent again. She had a master’s degree in meteorology and a job as a forecaster for the National Weather Service. She was good at her job. But not as good as Amos. Just about anyone could analyze the data and come up with a general area where a storm might brew. But Amos could scan the horizon, sniff the breeze, and then drive

with unveering certainty to the exact point at which the tornado would form. He knew the moods of a storm, where it would go, and how fast. That's why she'd always felt so safe with him.

Would she feel as safe relying on her own abilities?

"You'd better decide pretty quick," Amos said, " 'cause unless I miss my guess, that squeal of tires I hear means we're about to have company from Mississippi."

There was certainly nothing wrong with Amos's hearing, Victoria mused as, moments later, the crunch of gravel under tires and the shriek of brakes in need of new pads signaled the arrival of Roan Cullen.

"I'll get the door," she said just as the bell chimed.

"Victoria?" Amos stopped her. "Will you do it? As a favor to me, please. I can't think of anyone who could benefit more from your common sense and your reverence for life than my nephew."

She was not going to allow Amos to send her on a guilt trip. "I'll have to meet him first," she said, trying to sound sensible.

"Fair enough."

The bell chimed again, followed by a loud rapping and a muffled voice. "Unc? You in there? Up and at 'em! Those tornadoes aren't going to wait for us, you know."

"Oh, Lord," Victoria murmured as she hurried to open the door.

The man standing on the front porch looked exactly as she'd pictured him—only worse. No, not worse, just ... more. More rugged, more powerful, taller, broader, stronger, wilder. His loose khaki shorts were slung low on lean hips. His bright blue T-shirt, bearing the phrase I SURVIVED THE RIVER RAT RACE, COLDWATER, MISSISSIPPI hugged his wide shoulders and bulging biceps. His hair was on the long side, hanging almost to his shoulders in untamed waves of caramel brown streaked gold from the sun, and it hadn't seen a comb in a while.

Most disturbing were his eyes, a vivid, piercing blue assessing her boldly from his lean, weather-whipped face. He was almost intimidating—until he suddenly smiled, and tiny crinkles appeared at the corners of those alarming eyes and a dimple formed at the corner of his arrogantly upturned mouth.

"So, at long last, I get to meet the infamous Victoria Driscoll." He extended his hand, and Victoria took it automatically, acutely aware of the power in his casual grasp, the long, tanned fingers wrapping around hers.

"You must be Roan," she said coolly, not at all sure she liked his assessment. "And I'd say that between the two of us, if anyone's infamous, it's you. I'm surprised you've even heard of me."

"Oh, everyone in the Cullen family knows about you. Years ago we all thought you were a gold digger, but I guess if that were true, you would have either married Amos or left for greener pastures. Can I come in?"

Victoria could only stare in openmouthed shock. The man was unforgivably rude. In the first place, Amos wasn't exactly a prime target for a gold digger. He lived in a two-bedroom frame house in a modest neighborhood of Lubbock, Texas. He was a tenured

professor at Texas Tech University, so he had some security, but he was hardly rich. In the second place, Amos was her friend and mentor, nothing more. Anyone who thought otherwise was an ignorant fool.

Well, at least Roan Cullen had admitted that his assumption was mistaken. Figuring the best defense was to ignore his tactless comment, she stood aside to let him in.

"It's hotter than hell in here," Roan said. "Is the AC broken?"

"It's warm in here because Amos has a fever and he was chilled," she said, closing the door.

"A fever?" Roan's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Is he okay?"

"Get in here, boy, and I'll show you okay," Amos called irritably from the kitchen. "Can't stand it when people talk behind my back."

Victoria shrugged and led the way to the kitchen. She had already made up her mind—she wouldn't go on the road with Roan Cullen. She needed to think clearly and act sensibly while she was chasing. With Roan around, she was sure she could do neither.



"So, what's this about a fever?" Roan asked as he strode into the kitchen to find his uncle sitting at the table, hunched over a bowl of soup.

"It's not just a fever, it's the cold from hell," Amos grumbled. "And if you don't want to catch it, you'll keep your distance."

"I never get sick," Roan argued, leaning down to give the old man a hug. Amos was one of Roan's favorite relatives. They rarely saw each other these days, and Roan wasn't about to keep his distance.

"Amos, can I warm that soup up for you?" Victoria offered.

Roan turned his attention to the woman who'd answered the door. He had known she would be coming with them on their trip; Amos apparently never chased without her, not since his former chase partner had retired four years earlier. But Roan hadn't expected to find her firmly entrenched in Amos's house, playing hostess.

When she'd answered the door she'd been so cool and regal, looking down her nose at him, judging him, that he hadn't been able to resist saying something outrageous to shake her composure—which he had. But he'd never really believed her to be after Amos's money, not even all those years ago, when the rest of the family was all fired up about this coed Amos had become so fond of. Amos had more sense than to be taken in by a pretty face.

But Roan hadn't been prepared for her to be so pretty—tall and slender, with a classic cameo face, large hazel eyes, and thick russet hair pulled into a demure braid that trailed halfway down her back. The moment he'd laid eyes on her, he'd wondered what her hair would look like loose, falling over her shoulders. Bare shoulders.

Not that she was Roan's type. He liked women with easy smiles, the kind who flirted and teased and ultimately gave in, the kind who played hard and were willing to put up with his rather lackadaisical approach to commitment. Victoria Driscoll, he suspected, was none of those things. And yet she was intriguing, perhaps the type a staid older

man would fall for.

Roan wondered. She certainly moved about the kitchen with ease, as if she were accustomed to it.

“Would you like some soup, Roan?” she asked, all politeness.

“You should try it,” Amos said. “Victoria made it herself. She’s a marvelous cook.”

“Well, in that case I’d love some. Haven’t eaten since lunch, four hours ago.” His smile was met with cool complacency. Maybe he shouldn’t have made that gold-digger crack. He’d meant only to tease her, not turn her into a permanent enemy.

“There’s beer in the fridge, and some cold cuts,” Amos said. “If I know you, you’ll want something more substantial than soup.”

“Thanks, I think I will. It was a long, hot drive from Mississippi.”

“How did the raft race go?” Amos asked. “You win?”

Roan laughed easily. “There were almost two hundred entrants. I was in the lead for a while, but then I hit a snag in some white water. The milk jugs got hung up on—”

“Milk jugs?” Victoria asked, pausing in the middle of ladling soup into a bowl.

“The rafts had to be homemade to qualify.” He located salami, bologna, ham, and cheese in the refrigerator, along with some onion rolls. With practiced efficiency he began assembling a sandwich. “I floated old tires on a base of empty milk jugs. It was a damn good design too. I would have won if I hadn’t gotten caught up on those rocks.”

“Well, you can’t win ’em all,” Amos said.

“I came in third. Won a two-hundred-dollar prize, and a documentary production company bought my film, so it wasn’t a total loss.” He took his sandwich to the table and sat down at the place Victoria had set for him. She put a steaming bowl of soup in front of him without comment.

Well, it was a cinch his rafting exploits weren’t impressing her, which was rather refreshing. He sampled the soup. “Mmm, this is great, Vicky.”

A cold wave seemed to descend on the room, and Roan knew darn well no one had turned on the air-conditioning. Everyone grew very still.

“My name’s Victoria, not Vicky,” she said, her voice crisp.

“Oh, sorry. I’ll try to remember, but nicknames just sort of pop out of my mouth. Most people like them, right, Unc?”

“I don’t,” she said.

Amos frowned disapprovingly, but Roan wasn’t sure whether his uncle was displeased with him, with Victoria, or both of them.

“So, what time do we leave tomorrow?” Roan asked, diplomatically changing the subject.

Amos laid down his spoon. “Roan, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m hanging on to life by a thread. My sinuses are on fire, my eyes are practically swelled shut, and my lungs sound like a calliope. I’m also running a hundred-and-one-degree fever, last I checked. I’m not going anywhere for at least a week.”

“You mean you’re canceling the trip?” Roan’s disappointment was keen. Although he wouldn’t have minded a day or two to recharge his batteries, the thought of canceling the whole trip depressed him. For years he’d wanted to go storm chasing with his uncle,

and this was the first time Amos had ever consented to let him come along. He might not ever get another chance to see a tornado up close and personal.

“No, not exactly. You and Victoria can go without me. She needs a chase partner and you need a guide. The arrangement should work out perfectly—provided, of course, that Victoria agrees.” Amos exchanged a meaningful look with his protégé.

Roan could have kicked himself clear to Katmandu. Now he really regretted the gold-digger comment, and he shouldn’t have called her Vicky either. His fate rested in her hands, and judging from the black looks she kept aiming his way, the prognosis wasn’t good.



“I’ll get my stuff from the car,” Roan announced decisively. He left the kitchen, but not before giving Victoria a long, almost challenging look.

She was glad to see him go. She would be relieved of his overwhelming presence for a few minutes anyway.

“You could at least be civil to the man,” Amos scolded.

“Civil? He’s lucky I didn’t ‘accidentally’ dump that soup down the front of his shirt. He called me a gold digger!”

Amos’s bushy white eyebrows drew together in an expression of incredulity. “Gold digger! Good Lord, I thought I’d laid that stupid rumor to rest years ago.”

“It’s okay,” Victoria said quickly, before the professor got all excited and worked himself into another coughing attack. “He corrected himself. Said if I was after your money, I would have married you by now or moved on.”

Amos laughed uproariously at that, prompting a series of hacking coughs anyway. “And what a catch I’d be too,” he said when he’d recovered. “Don’t worry, missy, I think Roan was just rattling your cage. He doesn’t mean any harm. You’ll take him along, won’t you?”

Victoria tried not to look at Amos, at those hopeful, red-rimmed eyes. After all he’d done for her, how could she turn down such an earnest request? “I haven’t decided,” she said once again. “Amos, can you in good conscience send me off for two weeks alone with your nephew? At the very least he’ll drive me crazy. At the worst he’ll distract me so badly I’ll make a dumb decision and get us both killed.”

“Now, missy, I’ve never seen you get even a little rattled during a chase, and I don’t believe you’ll start now, no matter how, er, distracting my nephew might be.”

“Distracting” didn’t even begin to describe Roan Cullen, Victoria thought.

“Besides,” Amos continued, “he might turn out to be a better chase partner than you think. I’ll wager he’s a great navigator, and you can’t argue with his photographic skills. He’ll blow both of us away in that area.”

“Please, let’s not talk about getting blown away.”

Amos chuckled briefly, but then his expression grew somber. “If you don’t want to chase with Roan, I suppose I could find someone else for him to ride with. Those two kids from the university, John Higgenbotham and Dave Devors. They’re always looking

for someone to finance their chase trips, and I'll warrant Roan would front the money."

Victoria shivered at the thought of those three on the road together. "John and Dave? Neither of them can forecast their way out of a paper bag, and when they're lucky enough to find a storm, their main objective seems to be to punch right through the middle of it and do as much damage to their car as possible."

Amos frowned. "Hmm, you're right. Roan would only encourage them to be irresponsible. Any other suggestions?"

"What about Eddie and Marilyn Dunne?"

Amos shook his head. "I wouldn't do that to Eddie. You know how Marilyn is. She likes to chase something besides storms, and she'd be on Roan like mold on cheese." Amos sighed. "Oh, well, maybe next year. I hope he doesn't decide to take off on his own to chase storms. He knows just enough about it to get himself in real trouble."

Victoria couldn't stand to hear the defeat in Amos's voice. "Oh, all right!" she said, wondering what she was getting herself into. "I'll give it a try. But if Roan doesn't behave himself, I'm coming straight home."

Amos beamed. "That's my girl. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

They suspended their conversation when Roan came back inside carrying a cardboard box full of dirty laundry. "Okay if I use your washer and dryer, Unc?" he asked.

"Sure. It's out on the back porch."

"I remember."

Victoria watched him walk through the kitchen. She couldn't help herself. He had a certain aura about him that drew the female eye. It wasn't just his taut body either. It was more a sense of quiet but dangerous layers that hid just below the happy-go-lucky surface.

She realized Amos was talking to her.

"... leave the dishes and go watch the Weather Channel. I want to see what's cooking for tomorrow."

They sat together on the couch in the living room. Amos made notes on the photocopied blank maps he always kept at the ready. Victoria stared at the screen, but her attention was on the sound of running water and off-key whistling coming from the back porch.

"Just one thing I should warn you about," Amos said quietly, his eyes on the screen as he penciled in fronts, wind direction, and high and low pressure zones.

"Just one?" she said dryly.

"No matter what happens, don't let Roan drive."

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